

**RICE, REFUGEES, AND
ROOFTOPS
AIR AMERICA, INC.**

BOOK ELEVEN

1970

BUDDHIST ERA 2513

YEAR OF THE DOG

HARRY R. CASTERLIN

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INTRODUCTION

Book eleven continues to guide the reader through a multi-book anthology of the Second Indochina War in Laos, one in which the Author participated for nearly twelve years as a civilian Air America Inc. paramilitary helicopter pilot. Fifteen books are planned to complete the collection—one for each year, beginning with the Author's arrival in the Far East in 1961 as a Marine helicopter pilot. As a minimum of recapitulation appears from previous books, the reader is advised to read preceding material offered in linear sequence to achieve a more complete understanding of the history, culture, events, principals, and places.

The Lao War has often been referred to as "The Secret War," conducted during the ongoing "Cold War," a period of highly strained relations and struggle between the disparate ideologies between the communist and western nations. Although considered a misnomer in the Author's mind, there was method in allowing a civilian Central Intelligence Agency and its contract personnel to pursue a lengthy operation that sought to preserve the 1962 Geneva Accords on Laos, specifying that no foreign military operate in the country. Of course, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) used a different tactic. Communist leaders just denied ever being in the country. Another reason for adopting a clandestine stance in Laos was that disclosure of a close U.S. involvement and prosecution of a limited war would not produce negative world opinion in the event of Royal Lao Government defeats. A third motivation for maintaining a low key, quiet war was related to a lack of sufficient military assets to pursue yet another conflict in Southeast Asia in a landlocked country containing few roads or other lines of communication.

INTRODUCTION

As 1970 commenced, U.S. intelligence sources indicated that communist infiltration from North into South Vietnam was increasing substantially. Additionally, the North Vietnamese Army had begun moving large numbers of troops and equipment into both Cambodia and Laos.

With North Vietnamese leaders intent on preserving their hold on, and expanding what they considered a historical right to critical parts of Laos, 1970 proved a difficult year for the Royal Lao Government, its military forces, and friends, while attempting to preserve the kingdom. This was nowhere more prevalent than in Military Region Two (MR-2), site of the 1969 successful Plain of Jars operation, and titular homeland of many Meo tribal clans, principal warriors, and defenders for the Royal Lao Government (RLG) in that region.

Early in the year, the pressure of combat flying was equally difficult for us helicopter pilots, who were called upon to support sites that were in the process of falling to the communists, and to conduct major evacuations of both civilians and troops either relocating or fleeing encroaching enemy forces. As all those involved in the operation had predicted, by February, RLG forces proved too few in number and lacked the motivation to defend the expansive Plain of Jars (PDJ) or to repulse superior Vietnamese regular troops.

Thanks to the Allied air power advantage, the Plain of Jars had been held for a time during the first portion of the 1969-1970 dry season, but, like a slightly bastardized version of Sir Isaac Newton's law of physics pertaining to a body in motion, when the massive North Vietnamese Army offensive got underway, short of employing nuclear weapons--B-52 Arc Light strikes were still not sanctioned in Military Region Two--there was absolutely no way of containing enemy movement. By late February the Plain of Jars was again in enemy hands and we had lost our

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first Bell 205 helicopter--but not the crew--to enemy ground fire.

Despite attempts to impede them, the enemy did not stop their advance. For the first time, they continued marching south until reaching the gates of General Vang Pao's training and CIA-managed intelligence base at Long Tieng. It was only through the efforts of Special Guerrilla Units (SGU) from other military regions, regular Thai Army forces, Allied tactical air, and the impending rainy season that the base was preserved. During this period of hostility, we did not remain overnight (RON), but commuted daily to and from the site to provide support.

Even as the enemy was rooted out and withdrew from the immediate perimeter of The Alternate, for the first time during the long war, they never entirely departed the area. Vang Pao's annual monsoon season offensive, over months of hard fighting, placed demands on us fatigued warriors and achieved limited objectives.

By year end, the military situation in Military Region Two was reasonably static, with front lines pushed north nineteen miles of Long Tieng, and nearly the same as in previous years. However, the difference was that by the close of the official wet season pockets of enemy units remained in forward positions, further west than during any previous year. As normal seasonal standard operation procedures, they had not departed the field during the rainy season to rest and refit in North Vietnam, but were well supplied and in position to renew the offensive against Long Tieng and other government positions.

During a year beset with many firsts, in the spring political and military upheaval in Cambodia ousted the premier, and caused closure of a major logistical port vital to North Vietnamese interests supplying the war effort in South Vietnam. This turn of events forced Vietnamese construction teams and

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infantry to push their supply lines further west toward populated areas in southern Laos (Military Region Four). Consequently, provincial towns of Attapeu and Saravane were seized, and the southeast portion of the Bolovens Plateau was hotly contested. By year's end the enemy had conquered most of the territory in Military Region Four deemed necessary to ensure unimpeded access to their lines of communication along both ground and water routes.

On a personal level, FEPA, the Air America pilot union, an acronym for Far East Pilot Association, was negotiated, sanctioned, and ratified. For the first time, pilots began receiving compensation and benefits close to, or exceeding, what commercial airline pilots throughout the world took for granted. However, since our little war in Laos had morphed into a much larger conflict, no level of remuneration could have justified the greater risks involved. Some might argue that we always took multiple risks and were prepared to pay the ultimate cost, but as the war rumbled on those risks seemed to increase proportionally.

Book Eleven, as with all previous tomes in the collection, is the result of years of research, obtained from many sources. The material also draws information from the Author's letters, flight logs, photographs, and memory to produce narrative.

The Author recommends that the reader peruse previous books for year-by-year edification of the Second Indochina War in Laos. However, names, places, events, photos, and maps are included in this book to assist in the reader's understanding of a subject with which few are familiar. Although sometimes stemming from second-and third-party sources, with some origins lost in the shuffle, attempts are made to credit proper sources.

The Author loathes revisionism of the Cold War or Second Indochina historical events. Since nothing is more important in

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recording history than accuracy and consistency in reporting valid and reliable facts--"Just the facts son, only the facts"--every attempt is made to avoid compressing, modifying, or otherwise skewing actual historical events. Much of the era is reported as the Author perceived or researched. However, if the reader discovers any glaring errors in events, time frames, anecdotes, or other cogent factors, he should direct them to the Author's attention for reflection and possible correction.

Serving to supplement and maintain an unbroken linear storyline, particularly when the Author was absent from the field, Internet Email, phone conversations, and face-to-face interviews are liberally included. Also helping to fill voids and maintain a cohesive flow of narrative and consistency during the period timeline, other writer's efforts are culled, employed, and credited where deemed useful.

This massive work was conceived and begun circa 1985. In anticipation of, and to preclude the possibility of, an aging and failing memory, the majority of research was laboriously compiled during earlier years and filed in separate folders for future composing. Unfortunately, many individuals who actually participated in the Lao conflict, and contributed to the multi-decade project, are no longer available to confirm or deny information in this work. It seems with advancing years, this distressing situation accelerates as the years pass so quickly.

Lastly, the Author would like to salute and applaud the Air America (AAM), Bird and Son (B&S), and Continental Air Services International (CASI) civilian men and women of all nationalities, who contributed their efforts to the cause, some at the supreme cost. Kudos are also due members of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), State Department personnel, members of the United States International Aid Development (USAID), the International Voluntary Services Organization (IVS), the United

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States military services, and other organizations who participated in the Southeast Asian conflict during the long, frustrating years of the Cold War, while attempting to stem the flow of communism to free countries. It was unquestionably a prolonged period of distrust, stress, and hostility--hopefully one never to be repeated.

For many of those participants who failed to make the cut-RIP...

HRC

"The available evidence strongly indicates a vigorous communist campaign during the present dry season in north Laos. At a minimum, such a campaign would be aimed at retaking the Plain of Jars; the extent of their military preparations suggests that the communists may also intend to move against the major Meo bases and eliminate Vang Pao and his forces, once and for all. The communists probably are aware that Vang Pao's reserves are relatively thin; that a concerted campaign against his Meo forces could exhaust them within a single dry season; and that once the Meo, who have been carrying the major burden of the war in northern Laos, had been dispersed, the psychological impact on the RLG, combined with the military effect, could leave all of northern Laos open to the communists...

...We cannot predict the outcome of the current military struggle around the Plain of Jars except to note that Vang Pao is up against a much superior force and his troops lack the resilience and reserves to fight a sustained defensive campaign. But we have no doubt that a serious defeat would cause much alarm in Vientiane, probably even panic. In certain circumstances Souvanna might lose his ability to hold things together. Either he or the King might then feel it necessary to bargain with the communists..."

02/04/70 Special National Intelligence Estimate.

On January first, my fourth day working upcountry in Military Region Two (MR-2), I was still flying Bell 205 Ex-ray Whiskey Papa Foxtrot Juliet (couched in phonetic military language; as an acronym, XW-PFJ) with Len

Bevan as my Flight Mechanic out of General Vang Pao's ¹ Long Tieng base.

World calendars vary according to populations' cultural and religious doctrines. Asian communities largely celebrate their version of the Western New Year during different times, so the war for the Plain of Jars (PDJ) continued without respite.

Serious Allied bombing was underway on and around the Plain. This was often hampered by miserable weather that included not only low ceilings, but also haze and smoke. Therefore, I was relegated to a five hour and twenty-minute standby status until released for work in the afternoon.

For some time we had been aware that friendly control of the Plain of Jars could not or would not continue indefinitely. Even the Customer openly conceded this fact, as rumors persisted of the Vietnamese Army returning in strength. Refusing to commit to a tactical withdrawal in stages that would have pinpointed enemy concentrations for Allied bombing, Vang Pao (VP) attempted to retain his forward positions. I considered Vang Pao's stubbornness more than just a sop to the King and Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma for political reasons. It was a major issue of saving face. Moreover, like the tall mountains of Phou Pha Thi and Phu Bia, the superstitious Meo revered the PDJ as sacred and a natural wonder.

Since 1968 Vang Pao's mixed Meo Army had suffered defeat after defeat to superior communist numbers and sustained numerous casualties. With a severe manpower shortage, these losses were difficult or virtually impossible to fully replace. As a result, Vang Pao's personal reputation and responsibilities as regional commander of Military Region Two's, chief warlord, and civil leader of the Meo clans had suffered and substantially

¹ Privately called VP by those of us who knew him. To preserve space, the abbreviation VP will often be used in lieu of Vang Pao.

diminished. This had to have more than a little influence on the psyche of a person with such an enormous ego. Moreover, there were political leaders with varied agendas who wanted VP out of the picture, and others who desired relocation of the Meo clans to the "safe" hills in Military Region One's Sayaboury Province.

Over the previous two months the largely successful and formerly light-hearted operation had evolved into one that elicited more caution during conduct of my missions. Climbing to altitude while transiting suspect areas, I no longer flew at low levels while sightseeing, particularly in the contested northern-most regions.

I commenced work from the Site-22 Xieng Khouang base, a strategic airstrip located almost in the exact center of the Plain of Jars at the confluence of what were considered major crossroads for the Route-7 complex leading to Moung Soui.² Before the massive USAF bombing campaign in what was called Barrel Roll, the former town of Ban Ang had existed there. Since the December sapper attack on LL defenders, additional measures had been taken to fortify the position. More wire, more men, more guns arrived, and were deployed in reinforced defensive positions. In addition, a headquarters and Customer operations bunker, fitted with sheets of dirt-covered pierced steel planking (PSP), fifty-five-gallon dirt-filled drums, and sandbags stood back from the aircraft loading area. Stuck out in the middle of flat land like a sore thumb, defenses were certainly not perfect, and the exposed site largely depended on forward northern outposts for early warning, security, and the tenacity and willingness of the main base's defenders to survive

² The site was better known to us as Lima-Lima. Laterite dirt roads were still rudimentary and largely impassable by vehicles during the monsoon season.

a massive and sustained enemy assault. All these attributes were normally lacking in the Lao soldier psyche.

After a few local missions, I was dispatched with a load twenty-four miles northeast to Phou Nok Kok, more commonly known as Black Lion after Wil Greene, the hard-charging Customer responsible for maintaining the forward site's viability. Located at an elevation of over 4,500 feet, the site's fighting positions acted as a static chokepoint, overlooking and commanding a portion of Route-7 leading to the Plain of Jars. Since capturing the high ground by late August, crew-served weapons and patrols had served to interdict the important LOC below. At this time there was a lull at Black Lion, in contrast to previous sieges by enemy artillery and infantry. Under Greene's watch, mostly thanks to Allied air even under less than flyable conditions, all enemy thrusts had been countered by air strikes and government ground forces that reputedly resulted in hundreds of enemy casualties.

Although mainly supplied by air drop, I had previously worked landing zones on top with no problem. Of course, out of a sense of survival, I had never shut down or lingered long on a pad. While in the area I had observed fast mover jet pilots attacking bulldozers, other road equipment, and directing Bullpup missiles toward cave entrances at the foot of mountains on the north side of the valley. On this particular afternoon, taking advantage of improved weather, F-4 pilots were flying low from the southwest along the road to attack targets in Ban Ban Valley.

After establishing contact with the Black Lion radio operator on VHF 119.1 kilocycles ³ and ascertaining that all was quiet there, I commenced a tight approach to the mountaintop

³ I had four different VHF frequencies in hand to make contact with the site.

from the south. Air activity was still underway when I was ready to depart. Since prevailing winds were strong from the north, for safety I was committed to depart in that general direction, then, after achieving translational lift, to conduct a hard-right turn away from the valley. To preclude tangling with jets, I switched to the USAF tactical UHF frequency and attempted to raise one of the combatants. Probably too busy, no one answered my calls. Despairing of establishing radio contact, and to avoid spending any more time on the ground, creating a tempting target for enemy gunners, than necessary, I launched north, perpendicular to the road, with the intention of turning 180 degrees away from the valley. Just as I cleared the lip of the ridgeline, an F-4 pilot prematurely released a Bullpup. Belching a stream of fire from the rear and looking much like a blazing telephone pole, the missile flashed by my nose with an F-4 close behind. In addition to being considerably shaken, the incident reinforced my line of reasoning that Black Lion was indeed a dangerous place to work. Seconds made all the difference in those final days of the Plain of Jars operation.

Friday morning, following a one-hour standby for the Customer to evaluate radio reports of the overnight situation, I returned to the Plain via Sam Tong and the Ban Na route. The trip reminded me of the day I was cruising northbound from Site-20 and west of Site-72, when just after clearing a ridgeline, I spied slender green iron bombs plunging through wispy clouds into the jungle to my right. Likely unarmed, there were no visible explosions, but the drop was conducted in a friendly area. Alarmed, fearing more havoc would follow, I switched to controlling ship Crown's frequency to inquire as to the event. It was some time before anyone answered and I was able to relate what had just happened. Naturally, I inquired where the bombing was taking place and was informed by a young voice that bombers

were working on the north side of the Plain of Jars. The youngster was confused when I told him where I was flying. That was the end of the matter, and I could only surmise that a pilot returning south had inadvertently jettisoned a load of stores. As in the past, the incident only reinforced my forty-mile theory, one stipulating that wherever USAF types were operating in Laos, while flying at high altitude they were invariably forty miles off in navigation techniques. This tendency was disconcerting, and one that continued to plague me until almost the end of the war.

I spent one additional night at Long Tieng and then returned to Udorn on C-123K 636.

UDORN

With the advent of the New Year, necessary changes were effected in the Udorn Air America management structure. Following an assignment as commanding officer of the Iwakuni, Japan, Marine Corps Air Station and then retiring, the Company had hired Tex Dew to assist Base Manager, Ben Moore. Tex then served as Ben's deputy for a year or more. When former U.S. Navy Captain Moore departed for a life of leisure in Texas, Dew had automatically become the new Base Manager. CJ Abadie served as Dew's deputy. On the surface, their relationship appeared fine, but Chief Pilot helicopter (CPH), Wayne Knight, sensed there were deeper issues between the two men and thought Tex's departure may have been somewhat premature. The former Marine obtained work as a negotiator for the Flight Attendant's union.⁴

After Dew left Udorn, Abadie assumed the Base Manager slot by default. In addition to retaining his position as Manager of

⁴ Wayne Knight's input was merely speculative as to Dew's departure. He never discussed interpersonal relationships with either man.

Flying, Rotary Wing, Knight was also accorded the Assistant Base Manager title, with the stipulation that he fill in for Abadie in his absence.

Dick Ford was also appointed Assistant to the Base Manager, and would provide daily assistance to Abadie. ⁵

A SCARE

I found both boys sick with colds when I returned from Laos. Rick's problem was particularly serious with tonsillitis and high fevers, and as erythromycin's efficacy had diminished appreciably, it seemed that we were fast running out of viable antibiotics to treat his chronic condition.

On the sixth I learned that I was scheduled to fly the next day. That night, both boys coughed badly, which prevented us from sleeping, so Tuie went into Pete's room to comfort him. I managed to sleep a little when Tuie roused me middle morning. She had heard a strange sound from Ricky's room. She investigated when he did not respond to her call, and was frantic when she found him in a comatose state. We alerted the maid to watch Pete, bundled Rick in a blanket, and rapidly drove across town to the USAF hospital. The youngster was placed on a gurney, but before Doctor Label could administer aid, the boy convulsed in the clutches of a seizure. After enduring this he rested and seemed better. There was nothing more for us to do. After Doctor Label provided instructions and a bottle of Phenobarbital, indicating that Rick would have to take the medicine until he was five in order to minimize the risk of another seizure, we went home. It was a terrible night, and a

⁵Taipei Circular, Personnel Assignment, 12/30/69.
EW Knight Email, 11/26/00.
CJ Abadie Email, 07/06/01.



Mrs. Moore, Mrs. Lai Knight, and the long time Base Manager of the Air America facility Udorn, Thailand, Captain (retired) Ben Moore at home in Texas.

Knight Collection.

distressing thing for a helpless parent to observe a child undergo such an event. Rick slept for a time and then was up running around the house in the afternoon like nothing had happened.

Since it was early morning and I was groggy from sleep deprivation, I went to the base and begged off the flight schedule.

The only answer to Rick's tonsillitis problem appeared to be removal of his offending glands. As I was planning a July-August home leave vacation in the States, this would be a good time for such an operation.

MAJOR EVACUATIONS

Houei Tong Ko (LS-184), located in upper Military Region Two, had been stripped of a battalion in late November to participate in the recapture of Xieng Khouang Ville. This reduced security for what remained of a Meo troop presence and other refugees in southwestern Houa Phan Province to a few ADC home guard companies and those individuals not interested in living under communist rule. Therefore, increased enemy pressure and interdiction of Route-6 and other LOCs south toward the Ban Ban Valley necessitated refugee evacuation from Site-184 and the surrounding area.

After haggling, details had been worked out between Vang Pao, Air America, the U.S Air Force, and units embedded within the U.S. Embassy system. Agreement was reached to relocate the thousands of refugees and their possessions to an established refugee center at Ban Xon (LS-246), twenty-two nautical miles southwest of Sam Tong. Well-watered by a large stream, and protected by adjacent mountains, work had been underway for some time by AID to prepare a second site with a greatly enlarged

dirt runway to accommodate larger aircraft. This larger area would provide sufficient living space for the anticipated hordes of refugees from the Plain of Jars, and a fallback site for Sam Tong if the situation warranted.

Evacuation of the Houei Tong Ko area commenced on the fourth. Employing CH-3 (called Pony Express) and Air America helicopter crews, the operation continued into the middle of the month. When completed, more than 8,000 souls had been relocated.⁶

Regional USAID Chief Edgar "Pop" Buell returned to Sam Tong after home leave. Suffering increasingly frail health from years of living in the field in unsanitary conditions, he immediately became ill from a bout of recurring malaria and had to be evacuated to Vientiane. According to Blaine Jensen, the next senior AID representative at Sam Tong, after the Plain was captured in 1969 many people were located to safer areas in which USAID did not participate. However, in early 1970, when it became clear that the Plain of Jars would soon be lost, steps were taken to move refugees from of harm's way.

While the mostly helicopter supported Houei Tong Ko lift continued in Sam Neua, a second refugee evacuation commenced at Moung Soui.

"Air America pressed into service three C-123Ks-which were configured to carry 50 passengers by installing center-line seats-and three Caribou C-7's configured to carry 32 passengers per flight. With these six aircraft operating regularly seven days a week, Air America evacuated 5,627 refugees in nine days, moving them from the recently recaptured and refurbished airstrip at Moung Soui to a USAID/L-furnished relocation site at

⁶Kenneth Conboy with James Morrison, *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos* (Boulder, Colorado: Paladin Press, 1995), 251. Although not perfect, in the Author's estimation, Conboy's book fairly and accurately details much of the Second Indochina War in Laos.

Ban Xon...Flights were operated under the direction of USAID/L personnel at Moung Soui and Vientiane.

A major problem during the evacuation was the language barrier, even among the Lao themselves. Many of the refugees were Meo tribesmen from the mountains of Northeast Laos; they even had difficulty in communicating with their fellow Meo from the Moung Soui area...

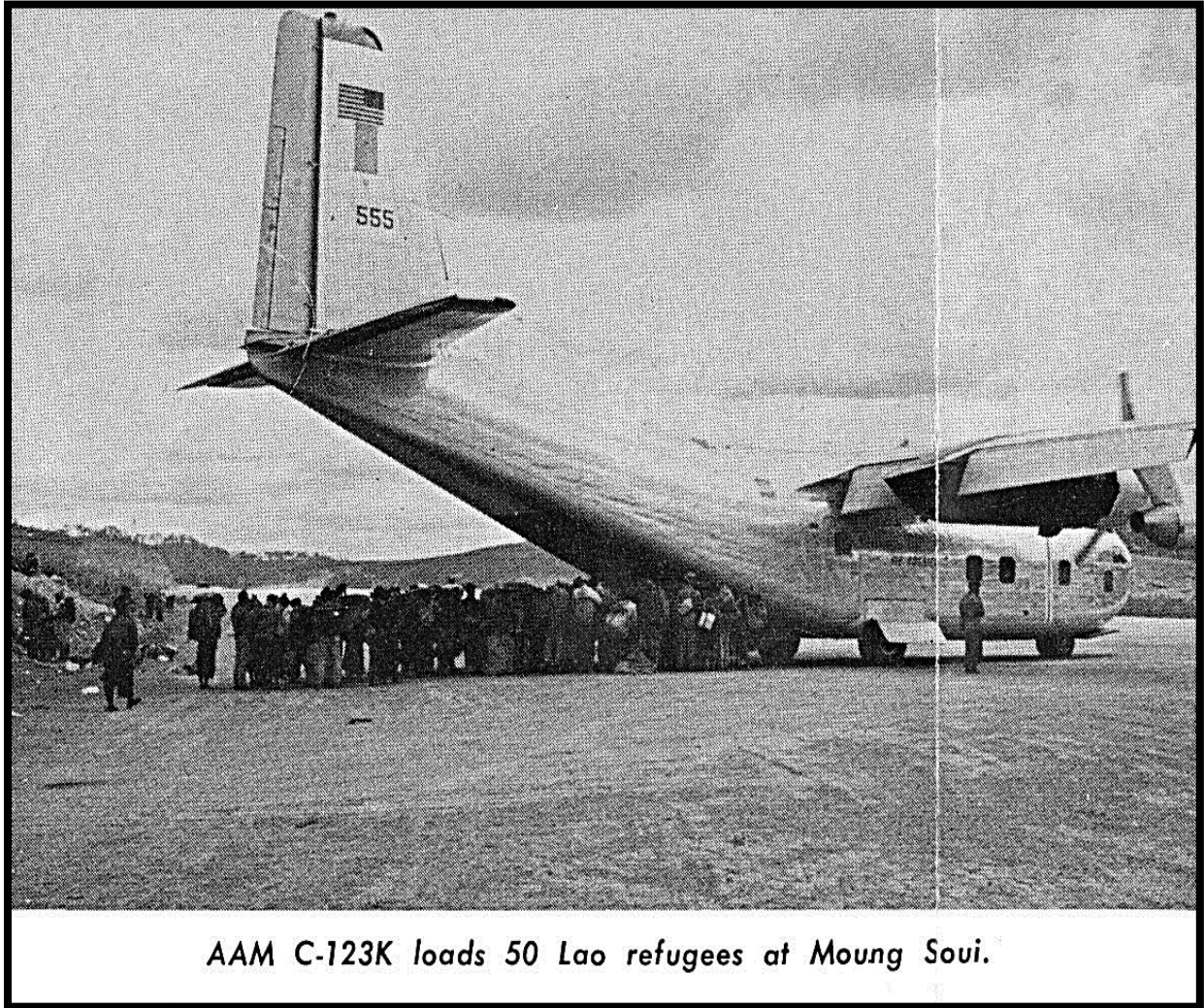
Refugee reaction to flying ranged from sheer terror to joy; the latter reaction coming from some of the refugees who had already flown in Air America planes, having been evacuated from their homes before as, over the years, the communist Pathet Lao kept on encroaching into free Laos.

For all intents and purposes, the refugees were leaving Moung Soui with all their worldly possessions in their arms and on their backs. They carried cooking utensils, baskets, and bags of all shapes and descriptions, and a few lucky ones were airlifted with their pigs, goats, and other small animals.

One major adjustment problem for many of the refugees coming from far Northwest Laos is that their progressive moves in advance of the Pathet Lao have brought them from high ground to much lower altitudes where temperature ranges, vegetation, insects, diets, and even cultures to which they have been accustomed over the years.

Each aircraft used in the airlift made three to four refugee flights daily. The planes would fly to Vientiane for refueling and necessary and also to pick up loads of drummed fuel for the back-haul to Moung Soui." ⁷

⁷Blaine Jensen Letter.
Air America Airlift, Article appearing in the *Air America Log*, Volume 4, #2 1970 Written by Vientiane Air America's Base Manager Jim Cunningham.



"Triple Nickel" being loaded with refugees at Site-108 for relocation to safer areas.

Air America Log Volume 4, #2, 1970.

WHOOPS

"I managed to burn up an engine a couple of days ago. It was my error and a stupid one. I am not sure if I will get my hand slapped. I could have lied about it and said that I didn't know what happened. We'll see if honesty is the best policy."

01/11/70 Letter Home.

Riding forty-five minutes on Air America photo recon Volpar N9542Z, I returned to Long Tieng on the morning of Thursday-eight January. From The Alternate, I boarded a fifteen-minute flight on Air America Porter N255F to Lima Lima, where I joined Charlie Weitz and Dave Crowell in 13F for an exfiltration mission in upper Military Region Two. These missions were conducted double crewed, with at least two aircraft, one to effect the extraction, one as a back-up ship in case of problems. Following the briefing, since the weather was reasonably good for a change, we elected to fly direct to UH8676 in Houa Phan Province, ten miles northeast of Houei Kha MOUNG (LS-111), north of Sam Neua Town. Should we encounter problems, Houei Tong Ko, although it was still being evacuated, would serve as an alternate landing site for maintenance problems or fuel. The Customer departed Site-22 in a Porter and led the way. By the time we arrived in the area, he had made positive radio contact with the road watch team and established that all was well at the position. The extraction was conducted without incident. By the time we returned to the PSP strip on the Plain, after the two hours and forty minutes roundtrip, we had used most of a maximum endurance fuel burn and the low fuel warning light was illuminated. Without much wiggle room perhaps this was not a wise move, but one that was calculated, for by now we knew the exact calibration of our ship's fuel gages.

Likely aware of the refugee evacuations being conducted throughout the area, enemy probes intensified on some of the more important forward strong points, and the sites were screaming for support. Therefore, General Vang Pao began reassigning troops to reinforce landing zones in the hills north of Nong Pet and into Xieng Khouang Ville.

That afternoon, after the Sam Neua mission, I was reassigned to fly 12F. Several of us were slated to lift troops north to positions overlooking the 7/71 crossroads and provide assistance to Black Lion.

It was very hot and steamy at LL when we received the word to crank up and launch. In my haste to start the engine, I inadvertently left the throttle slightly cracked. As soon as I pulled the starter trigger and heard the characteristic sucking whoosh and roar sound, I instantly knew that an explosion from an improper air-fuel mixture in the combustion chamber had resulted in a hot start. Although I took immediate action to rectify my mistake, in the nanosecond involved, the super-hot fire had possibly burned or cracked gas producer or power turbine wheels, and I was finished flying that day. I am not sure of the reason for my inattention during the start, but it could have ranged from nervousness over the current unwinding situation or the concern about my son.

Regardless, of the cause I had fouled up and would have to assume the blame. Upon investigation, which was limited to looking into the tailpipe for evidence of excessive heat, the Flight Mechanic could not determine much from looking into the exhaust stack. It would require an engine teardown and inspection by engine experts to determine if there was damage. Therefore, embarrassed as I was over the incident, I was obliged to call Udorn management on high frequency and inform them of my error. Udorn told me to leave the aircraft in place;



Troops unloading cargo from the Author's helicopter in the foothills of Phou Kok, a rough landing zone north of the enemy controlled Nong Pet road junction. The enemy logistic road system is located in the valley below the pad. Smoke from shelling or an Allied air strike can be seen in the upper right.

Author Collection courtesy of the Customer.

a maintenance team would arrive the following day, or ASAP, to remove the old engine and install the new one.

The next day was a bitter one for me, watching my peers depart for the Plain of Jars and their assigned tasks. At such a critical juncture in the operation, all helicopters and crews available were required for support, particularly at Black Lion.

I suppose a Bell Lycoming 204 engine was not readily available, or had to be built up, mounted on a transportable engine stand, and prepared to ship upcountry, for it was later in the day before one arrived with a maintenance team. Since there was nothing for me to do, I remained stewing at The Alternate, pending a call to flight check the new engine.

A TOUGH LOSS

Despite terrible weather that precluded all but USAF IFR fast mover bombing at Phou Nok Kok, on most days and under constant artillery bombardment since 2 January, Black Lion's dwindling number of defenders held fast. Friday night, adverse weather of less than a 5,000 feet ceiling and five miles visibility, normally required for USAF close air support, impacted the Black Lion position. Taking advantage of a lack of close air support, employing a pincer attack technique, elite enemy Dac Cong sapper units, backed by three Vietnamese battalions, struck the Pakse battalion's positions on the peak of Phou Nok Kok. During the battle, two of three strongholds were overrun.

Because of the danger involved, and likely because Wil Greene had already been slightly wounded by mortar fire directing a counterattack, Case Officers had been ordered to no longer RON there. Instead, talking to the FAGs from orbiting

aircraft, they took requests for supplies, directed action, and exhorted their charges to remain in place.

On the tenth, again taking advantage of continuing bad weather, another tough special enemy unit surged up the north side and, using wire breaching equipment, seized the mountain's highest point. Then, using crew-served weapons, they began blasting the remaining outpost below.

When a Case Officer arrived by Huey in the morning, almost two dozen enemy bodies were strung in remaining razor wire. The headquarters bunker had been severely impacted, but the commanding officer was still alive.

Tactical air was able to provide adequate support when the cloud cover lifted. Under the onslaught of attacks, the remaining enemy on the peak, obliged to seek cover, were rendered impotent.

Enemy attacks continued. Demoralized after almost six weeks of pounding from artillery or combat operations, the few hundred remaining Meo and SGU defenders held for two additional days, but, lacking adequate resupply or the air support they expected and relied on, began withdrawing west from the strategic mountain top without fulfilling the fall concept of a phased withdrawal to provide lucrative targets for Allied air.

A company-sized unit of Vang Pao's troops, lifted to high ground just northwest of Phou Nok Kok, provided a desultory attempt to expel the Dac Cong (Vietnamese military equivalent of our Special Forces) on the 15-16th. Again, poor weather negated Allied air from leading the charge, and the counteroffensive failed. There were just not enough human assets available to cope with the superior numbers and determination of the seemingly inexhaustible enemy army.



The PIC of Papa Foxtrot Gulf delivering troops to an unimproved elevated pad in Laos.

Knight Collection.

Under the continuing umbrella of poor weather, Vang Pao commenced efforts to move units to the Nong Pet area and reinforce the mixed Meo, FAR and Savannakhet SGU already manning area high ground positions. He also continued to beg in vain for more troops from other military regions to bolster his defenses.

The loss of Black Lion enabled the enemy to move the 148 Regiment of the 316 Division further west virtually unimpeded. This left the floodgates open toward the critical Nong Pet junction, other government positions along Route-71, and the lower Plain of Jars. In tandem with the 141 Regiment, they were tasked to move into position and reclaim the entire Plain of Jars. It appeared to us the end was close at hand.

Vientiane Chief of Station Larry Devlin later stated that Allied air contributed to much of the success on the Plain of Jars, especially at Phou Nok Kok. However, he was particularly critical of Vang Pao's overriding reliance on air power, claiming that this tactic worked well during offensive operations, but not in defense. Furthermore, USAF convoluted methods involved in scheduling timely strikes and lack of flexibility were totally understood and not well suited to the part guerrilla/part conventional Lao War. Instead, slower propeller planes capable of loitering and delivering accurate munitions and close air support were preferred over fast movers

that had considerably less impact in mountainous terrain. ⁸

Saturday morning our mechanics returned to LL to complete installing the engine in 12F. I accompanied them to perform the required starts in order to check for oil and fuel leaks, and to hover and perform flight checks as per the engine change checklist. I logged one hour and eighteen minutes, but with all the starts and shutdowns, spent more than twice that time in the cockpit.

Before I could start working my relief pilot arrived on Caribou 393. After the engine, "A" frame, and mechanics' tools were loaded onto 393, we boarded for the eighteen-minute trip to Long Tieng. Gear and personnel were offloaded on the ramp, pending a ride south to Udorn. This occurred later in the day, by C-123 576 which provided transportation south.

Since the hot start involved some expense and was classified as an incident, I was obliged to prepare a statement for the Chief Pilot's office. I was not penalized and an engine inspection later revealed no damage to internal parts. This made me feel better, but I vowed to be more careful in the future regardless of the situation.

Since I was due for scheduled time off (STO), and Ricky needed new orthopedic shoes, and Peter required measles vaccine, only obtainable in Bangkok, on the eleventh we decided to make a

⁸Segment Sources:

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 251.

Central Intelligence Bulletin, 01/12/70.

Victor Anthony and Richard Sexton, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: The War in Northern Laos 1954-1973* (Washington: Center for Air Force History, 1973), 324.

Thomas L. Ahern, Jr., *Undercover Armies, 1961-1973: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos 1961-1973* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, released 02/19/09), 333, Downloaded from the Internet, 03/22/09.

Professor William Leary 1970 Notes-Interview with COS Larry Devlin.

Leary Article about Wil Greene Appearing in *Vietnam Magazine* 12/97, 2.

quick trip to the big city on the night train. Pete was still coughing, so we elected to leave the little fellow home in Khun Yai's capable hands.

The special shoes were only available at Siriraj (Sirilart) Hospital University across the city in Thonburi Province. This always afforded us an adventure, for it meant a long taxi ride to the western part of Bangkok, then a short boat ride across the Chao Praya River. After Rick's foot measurements were taken, we were promised the new shoes within three days.

While still in Bangkok, always concerned about my mortality, I went to the law offices of Tillke and Gibbins, where I had previously conducted legal business. This time, after the staff researched New Jersey law, I purchased a new will reflecting my changing conditions. This would assign my Father and the Plainfield bank co-executors and trustees of my estate. We also talked about the problems of joint accounts and the viability of placing my wife's name on the stock certificates.

With Peter's measles vaccine in hand, we returned to Udorn on the 17th.

FRENCHY'S MOMENT OF TRUTH

French Smith was hired by the Company in 1965 to fly Saigon Bells in the Bob Hitchman managed program, and had not transferred to Udorn until August when there was a requirement for additional crews to double crew Bells at the inception of the Plain of Jars operation. Frenchy had experienced his share of combat: born in 1925, he had participated in both World War Two and Korea. Moreover, his reputation preceded him from former U.S Army buddies and Air America peers, who universally



Air America Captain French Smith.

considered him an excellent Bell pilot--all this without being bombastic. Although Smith was extremely popular and fit into our overall mold, our group had experienced these types before. The Rendezvous Club bar and the effects of alcohol offered a more personality-oriented and bragging environment than the field, and was not the best environment to judge a person's flying ability, only their gift of gab and blarney. Upcountry work, particularly that conducted under fire, was the only basis for determining if a person was reliable and capable of performing the often-difficult work. Still, most newbies worked out well after guidance. Those who did not either weeded themselves out, or died. Time was the best judge.

On the evening of 16 January, Smith was at Long Tieng along with other mixed Bell and H-34 pilots. French was crewing XW-PFF with Phil Velasquez, considered one of the better Filipino flight mechanics. Because of the overflow of RON crews at Sam Tong, Porter pilot Leslie Bays, who normally worked for USAID, was staying at The Alternate. The popular nightly poker game was in full swing with Smith, Mick Prulhiere, and Bays among some of the participants.

Even before the fall of Phou Non Kok, because of the rapidly deteriorating situation in and around the Plain of Jars that included probes on most of our forward defensive lines at the major road junctions, LL, Xieng Khouang Ville, and points east, one of our Udorn Flight Information Center (FIC) personnel, Jim Wilson, was at Site-20A to complement and assist the designated Raven intelligence officer. Regardless of where he worked, Jim took his job seriously and attempted to conduct accurate and timely pilot briefings. The men worked out of an office on the south side of the runway, and we were encouraged to visit the map room daily to obtain the latest Raven-gathered

intelligence and swap what we knew before flying. For one reason or another, not all our pilots took advantage of this service.

Sunday morning after breakfast, armed with bags of sandwiches, French, Phil, and Customer Chuck Campbell (Whitetop) departed Long Tieng for the normally twenty to twenty-five-minute flight to LL. It was 0745 hours. While clearing the Sam Tong valley and approaching the vicinity of Ban Na, Smith observed a thick cloud layer on the southern edge of the Plain. Such weather was normal during most January mornings, when low cloud layers sprawled across most of the Plain of Jars. The thickness of the layer, or presence of tiered clouds above, determined how soon heating from the sun would tend to lift a ceiling by convection or "burn off" fog or clouds. Of course, this presupposed no other weather was moving southeast, generated from the winter monsoon emanating from China. This year, it seemed that more adverse weather than normal infused our work area, making it easier for enemy units to move about, largely undetected by whatever patrols were active or air reconnaissance.

To avoid low level flight over ground that was no longer considered a hundred percent secure, Frenchy elected to climb on top to achieve better visibility. Despite the aggravation and inability to see the ground from over the undercast condition, it was fairly easy to judge a general position from mountain peaks surrounding the Plain that fortuitously popped through the clouds. Using these visual clues and time-distance, Smith was able to soon find a hole and circle down almost over his destination.

As Whitetop hopped out to talk over the current situation with the site commander, Papa Foxtrot Foxtrot was loaded for a supply flight to a northern outpost. After returning to Site-22, Smith was met by Campbell, who proposed a flight five miles

north to the Echo pad at UG0659. The Bell was loaded with about 400 pounds of rice and other food. As French was not familiar with the landing zone, and Chuck had learned from the commanding officer that several hundred enemy had recently moved into the western area, he decided to accompany the crew to point out suspected enemy locations.

With Chuck riding in the left seat, French launched directly north. The overcast had lifted a bit to 800 feet. Smith elected to climb to just under the cloud layer.⁹ About halfway to the outpost, the characteristic small arms sound of corn popping was heard. French immediately began taking evasive action to avoid the ground fire. All was naught. Several loud thuds jarred PFF. This was followed by illumination of almost all the center pedestal console caution lights--sort of like an illuminated Christmas tree. The engine flamed out and the silence became deafening. With gravity taking control, and only seconds before ground contact, Smith entered autorotation, then issued a Mayday in the blind, followed by his problem and location.

French's proficiency in the Bell under duress was well established from years of combat flying. Consequently, he landed the aircraft smoothly in a relatively flat open area at UMT coordinates Uniform Golf 0470 without incurring damage. It marked the first time in recent history that one of our helicopters had been shot down without recourse while conducting a mission.

⁹ I had previously worked this area. Upon advice of Long Tieng FIC, other pilots, and Customers, flights to this landing zone from LL were conducted using circumnavigation, first flying northwest, and then east in a dogleg fashion to avoid overflying the enemy. They were never flown direct.

As Chuck bailed out of the left cockpit and Phil from the right cargo door opening, Smith took a couple of seconds to collect his thoughts. Then, leaving the battery switch on, he attempted to exit the cockpit seat, but, like what often happened during exciting moments, forgot to unplug his helmet wiring. A jerk on his head and neck reminded him of the error and he was momentarily delayed. French then gathered his AK-47 weapon, taped magazines, briefcase containing letters, identification, a first aid kit, and followed his mates plunging into high grass seventy-five feet in front of the helicopter.

While resting and taking stock of the situation in a prone position, the group ascertained that they had probably glided a little distance away from the enemy, as there was silence on the Plain and no one was currently shooting at them. However, it was also likely the bad guys were headed toward the Bell, which, like a sentinel, prominently sat on ground behind them with the rotating beacon flashing and the blades still slowly unwinding. At that moment the trio realized they had better form a rapid and coherent plan to find and establish immediate safe cover for survival, and to await rescue.

Spotting a bomb crater, they advanced at high-port ¹⁰ about 300 or more feet to the east. As the exposed men reached the rim and began descending into the pit they were observed and ground fire erupted. French and Velasquez remained in the void, while Chuck found a smaller mortar hole twenty feet away that would afford cover and some crossfire effect. Not willing to be captured, he prepared for the worst: to defend his fighting hole to his last round.

Chuck, a former Marine sergeant, never ventured anywhere without carrying his trusty M-16 rifle that fired 5.56mm rounds

¹⁰ High-port: A military term indicating rapid movement.

and possessed great range and high velocity. He also carried a portable receive/transmit HT-2 hand-held radio. With the M-16 generally not available to Air America crews,¹¹ both French and Phil carried the more readily available AK-47 assault rifles, arguably the best combat weapon in the world, especially with extra banana-shaped thirty round magazines.

An enemy unit began moving across the hilly terrain toward them, employing fire and maneuver technique. In order to apprise the bad guys that they were armed and dangerous, and possibly to discourage them from their effort, Smith and Velasquez alternately rose up, pointed their barrels over the crater rim, and cranked off a few rounds of semi-automatic fire in the direction of enemy fire. While also firing his weapon, Campbell attempted to talk the PIC of Hotel-59, Captain Mike Prulhiere, toward their position.

After several minutes, all firing stopped. Sing-song voices were heard, soon followed by two grenades that exploded on the edge of the crater, scattering dirt and shrapnel into the pit. This was followed by the distinctive whap-whap sound of an H-34 rotor system from the southwest. While Whitetop continued to direct Captain Prulhiere and the rest of his crew, Captain FG Steele and Flight Mechanic RA Ramos, Mick spotted Papa Foxtrot Foxtrot and came to a hover close to the ship. At that time a B-40 rocket impacted and severed the Bell's tail section. Simultaneously, Hotel-59 was hit by several rounds of small arms fire. While the ground-bound crew watched their rescue chances dissolving before their eyes, Prulhiere pulled pitch and departed to the north.

¹¹ Nikki Fillipi carried an AR-15 rifle, a smaller version of the M-16 that he had obtained in South Vietnam.

Upset, Phil stood up and fired his last rounds. Frenchy's weapon was also empty. Phil still carried a .45 caliber pistol; Smith a .38 caliber handgun. Out of 7.62mm rifle ammunition, luck, and ideas, French was in the process of tying a white handkerchief of surrender to the barrel of his AK when Campbell entered the crater. He too was down to his last few rounds.

Then they heard the chugging of a R-1820 H-34 engine from the north. Prulhiere was returning for a second rescue attempt. Still not seeing the crew, Mick landed 300 feet from the crater where he thought the men would be located. At the same time, desperately worried that their quarry might elude them, an estimated hundred enemy then in the attack mode popped out of the grass 600 feet from Hotel-59 and 300 feet from the downed crew. Then, in a line abreast formation, they began rushing down a ridge, blowing whistles, screaming, and firing.

Flying Air America Porter N358F, Captain Les Bays had been assigned to Bouam Long to deliver eight Meo soldiers to a position. While departing Site-32 he heard a Mayday call. Without thought of what he could accomplish, he headed south toward the Plain. He arrived in time to see the H-34 arriving and the second rescue attempt unfolding. Out of sheer desperation, he thought that he might cause a distraction and draw some fire away from the principals by diving on the downed Bell. Although Bays' courage cannot be disputed, it is a moot point how much his action contributed to the eventual rescue.

During all the tumult the three men dashed for Hotel-59. Despite being the oldest at forty-seven, Frenchy reached the ship first. However, he was so exhausted that he was not able to climb into the cargo compartment. Instead, he pitched his AK-47 onto the plywood flooring and was assisted into the ship with Phil boosting and the Flight Mechanic pulling him up and onto the decking. As Smith watched the enemy charging at them, Chuck

turned, kneeled, and fired his M-16. Expending his final magazine, Campbell dropped at least two enemy, hitting them in the chest and propelling them backwards in a macabre death-induced acrobatic summersault. All the while Prulhiere was adding power and nervously screaming for Chuck to board-now-now-now. ¹²

Hotel-59 received five additional hits while transitioning to flight. After airborne for Lima Lima, the rescued men soberly realized that under impossible odds, with bullets flying all around them, they had survived on the ground, physically unscathed, for twenty-eight minutes.

Bays was already on the ground when Mick landed. He was examining a large hole in his Porter's left fuel cell. In addition, during his diversion, two rounds had penetrated the cabin floor, missing the Meo soldiers onboard and exiting through the cabin roof. Another round had entered the cockpit between the pilot and co-pilot seat, occupied by a red beret lieutenant. When the firing commenced, the lieutenant screamed, "*Enemy shoot! Enemy shoot!*" Bays considered this outburst so amusing that he began laughing. In contrast, red beret found Bays' mirth lacking humor and later told to Vang Pao that he never wanted to fly with the crazy American again.

As Vang Pao greeted all those involved in the fun, eighteen holes were counted in Hotel-59. The three men went back to Long Tieng on a separate aircraft. Smith was driven to an office in a two-story stone building on SKY hill that he was unaware existed. He was debriefed by several unfamiliar individuals, one wearing a suit. Then, with rumors circulating of an impending

¹² After the incident, because of Campbell's superior expertise wielding an M-16 rifle and ability to temporarily ward off the attacking enemy, more Case Officers elected to carry automatic weapons during flights.

sapper attack at The Alternate, French and Phil caught a ride to Udorn.

Hotel-59 was topped off at LL. As raw fuel poured from bullet holes, Mick Prulhiere flew back to Alternate. Not wanting to leave the helicopter on the ramp overnight, after the fuel tanks were again topped, he departed south. Despite losing fuel at an alarming rate, Mick managed to exit the hills at Ritaville Ridge, but shortly thereafter the engine quit from fuel starvation, and he was committed to a full autorotation on Vientiane Plain.

A secret CIA message regarding the incident was issued immediately:

"[Headquarters] wishes to specifically commend pilots L.M. Prulhiere and [F.G. Steele], flight mechanic R.A. Ramos and Air America Captain Les Bays for their courageous action resulting in the successful rescue of the downed crew and passenger of an Air America helicopter on 17 January.

Despite the fact that the crew of Hotel-59 and Porter 58-F received heavy ground fire and without regard to their personal safety, they displayed a dedication to duty and a coolness under fire which is most certainly in the highest traditions of and service of the U.S. Government. Please convey [headquarters] admiration and deep gratitude for their heroic actions."

Not recoverable and with the Plain of Jars untenable, Papa Foxtrot Foxtrot was ultimately destroyed.

After our STO in Bangkok we arrived at the Udorn train station early that morning. Later in the day, I drove the Cortina to the Air America facility to retrieve mail, purchase some items in the Country Store, and obtain the latest upcountry news from those in the area and the Chief Pilot's office. One juicy tidbit circulating the compound was about Frenchy's morning shoot down and rescue on the Plain of Jars. The news did

not make sense and most people were surprised that French had chosen to fly directly north from LL, when we had been generally conducting missions to the same area by an indirect "dog-leg" route to avoid overflying the enemy. They were equally amazed that Smith never partook of FIC briefings at Long Tieng. If believable, his actions that day were unexplainable, not consistent with his vast experience and stellar reputation. Something was drastically wrong with the equation. It smacked either of extreme laziness or a disturbing "I don't care attitude." French was certainly not an unintelligent person, but his purported disdain to seek and obtain current intelligence, especially when provided and particularly in an area where the military situation was highly fluid, was indeed curious. Granted, proper current information was not always available, valid, or reliable, but in my mind, it was the pilot's obligation and responsibility to make an attempt to protect not only himself, but also the crew and aircraft. We normally did this through knowledge of the situation. Smith was not the only pilot in this category, but marked the only person who nearly paid the ultimate penalty for his behavior.

Equally curious was the conundrum of Chuck Campbell. As the field Customer, was he unaware that the enemy was located along the flight path? If so, was the supposedly routine flight a calculated risk that morning? These questions were never

adequately answered. ¹³

Except for the assured revenue loss, I was not unhappy at the loss of Papa Foxtrot Foxtrot. From all the previous incidents the machine was involved in, particularly mine, I suspected that the machine was cursed-if there was such a thing. I was in a querulous mood when I left the CPH office and encountered Frenchy and Phil in the corridor headed toward the office. They were a mess. Both appeared fatigued, dirty, sweaty, and disheveled, but alive. I was happy to see them, but without thinking, asked Smith in passing why he had flown over the enemy instead of using our normal dog-leg route around them. This was the wrong thing to say at the time, something I deeply regretted

¹³ Years later, while the Author was still conducting research, Mike Jarina offered another opinion. Mike always participated in Udorn FIC briefings before going upcountry, also those that were conducted upcountry before a Special Mission. He considered his best Special Mission briefing one accomplished by a new black-haired briefing officer in his thirties, wearing black pants and a white shirt. All the pilots involved in the mission attended the briefing. Senior man, Charlie Weitz, was the leader. Because of the nature and unavailable information of the exact location for the mission, it was finally scrubbed.

Mike indicated that in general he never received any real time information as far as specific enemy locations were concerned.

He claimed that he did not know there was a collocated FIC/Raven map and briefing room on the south side of the runway. He considered Customer territory off limits unless invited. To me, although he had been flying H-34s since 1965, Mike's statement sounded like a prime example of inexperience at a site, difference in programs, and lack of rapport with the 713 Customer. Unfortunately, Mike's lot was not unique and continued through the entire war.

Mike's briefings consisted of, "*Load this stuff and take it there.*" He never knew or asked the reason for a mission. Other times he would land at a site and the loader would say, "*I have a package for you. Take it there.*" There was no indication where the enemy was located. After Colonel Tong died, there were no more guides at Na Khang. Tong Sar did fly with Mike once, but he only wanted a ride.



Captain French Smith in better days.

later, especially when Frenchy replied, "You are all heart, Dick." ¹⁴

An unlikely hero emerged that day. Proving that every person, even the least likely, was worthy of the task when the situation dictated, Mick Prulhiere's successful rescue actions under fire twice that day ranked as one of the helicopter program's most outstanding acts of courage ever. This was all the more puzzling to some, for Mick's reputation with his peers was not especially distinguished during upcountry work. CPH Knight had no first-hand knowledge or reason to doubt Prulhiere's character or intestinal fortitude, but he had received previous complaints regarding Mick's performance during infil/exfil missions. In the role of SAR ship, it was reported that Mick was always too high to function efficiently in case of trouble.

For personal reasons, Prulhiere rarely flew upcountry again, and opted for the H-34 functional check flight (FCF) program when it was established under Tom Moher in February.

While analyzing other pilots' conversations relating to the incident, Wayne was cognizant of a possible discrepancy in Smith's flight path that morning, but because it was largely hearsay, he did not believe the issue something to pursue at the time. Therefore, the issue was dropped and the incident classified as an operational loss.

¹⁴ In all frankness, my undiplomatic mouth characteristically often caused me trouble--and still does. Also, as I experienced from my SAR in North Vietnam, French might have been suffering from some aspects of psychological trauma. My outburst did not seem to affect our overall long-term relationship, although I no longer harbored the same respect I formerly did for Frenchy.

ZORRO

Aircraft incidents were commonplace on the Plain of Jars and not reserved for one organization. Lima Lima's unique location afforded an alternate emergency landing field for propeller driven aircraft with maintenance problems or battle damage rendering them unsuitable for return to Thailand.

After French and Phil departed for The Alternate, AH-1H driver Captain Terry Bolstad, attached to the 22nd Special Operating Squadron (SOS) Zorro unit at the Nakhon Phanom (NKP) USAF base, experienced a moment of truth. While orbiting high in a designated SAR location during a fast mover strike northeast of the Plain of Jars, his ship, "Bad News," developed a rough running engine. The vibrating engine began to backfire and then lost all power. He began to spiral down through the clouds and was contemplating bailing out when the low Jolly Green crew spotted him. Still at altitude, he was directed to glide toward Site-22. Bolstad conducted a gear down dead stick landing, then, like Martin had done the previous year, sucked up his gear upon seeing the bomb crater to create friction and stop his machine.

Jolly pilot, Lieutenant Colonel Mateen landed, retrieved Bolstad, and delivered him to Udorn, where he attended a 56 Special Operations Warfare (SOW) party, without benefit of his party suit.

Bob Arnau, a CH-3 pilot with the 21st SOS Knives at Nakhon Phanom, had formerly been a jet pilot. Because of USAF policy, pilots could not serve consecutive tours in the same aircraft. Therefore, by the late sixties, field grade officers were transitioned to helicopters. Bob arrived in the field in early 1969, and after six months was considered one of the most experienced instructor pilots in the squadron.

Following Bolstad's successful landing at LL, on Wednesday morning, Arnau was assigned to lead a flight of CH-3s with A-1 escort and a maintenance officer and NCO to Site-22, where they could assess the damage to TS-609. Base intelligence personnel were unable to provide detailed information regarding the state of the site, only that the situation was considered fluid.

While still some distance from the Plain of Jars, Arnau called in the blind on the Air America frequency, inquiring if anyone had recently worked in the area. A pilot answered that he had experienced heavy fire in the area the previous day. Another pilot humorously suggested they attempt a landing, and if no one shot at them, it would be alright to land.

From overhead troops were seen adjacent to the strip milling about. The armada was not fired at, so Arnau elected to land while the A-1 pilots trolled the immediate area and the second helicopter crew held at altitude. With minimum time spent on the ground, maintenance people safety wired the guns and ejection seat, and rapidly assessed the crash damage to "Bad News."

The next day another team arrived to rig the A-1H for extraction. A CH-64 then slung the plane to Long Tieng. It was subsequently delivered to Nakhon Phanom and repaired. Captain Bolstad was accorded the honor of conducting the functional check flight and "Bad News" was eventually returned to flight status.

A BIG CHANGE IN POLICY

Not long after the Smith incident a significant sea change occurred in our helicopter program. Because automatic weapons employed by the Customer and crew had been instrumental in delaying the enemy charge, certain death, or capture, and

enhanced the three men's dramatic rescue, for the first time during my tenure, the Customer (and by default the Company) officially sanctioned and provided helicopter crews weapons for upcountry use. They took the form of the Israeli 9mm submachine gun Uzi "survival" weapon. A long time coming, it marked a curious reversal in the United States Government's (read State Department) previous policy. The facade of Laos being a neutral country that employing unarmed civilian Air America crews for USAID work was being maintained.

Since Air America management in Taipei, Taiwan, normally responded to whatever they were ordered from Washington, and weapons of any kind were officially forbidden as per the Company Personnel Manual, I can only surmise that in addition to the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane, this new policy had to be processed through higher CIA, State Department, and who knows what other channels.

Wayne Knight was not sure this new policy constituted a serious alteration in Air America management's position in relation to carrying firearms. He believed the change had a lot to do with a suitable weapon that might be classified useful for survival purposes. However, the fact was that the Uzi sub-machine gun is not a passive, but an offensive weapon.

Before the transition was underway, Wayne was informed that the Israelis had captured a ship laden with Eastern European weapons during one of the major conflicts with their neighbors. An AB-1 person invited him to a special corner of the "Q" warehouse and showed him a large quantity of new AK-47 rifles stored in original wrappings: a gift from the Israelis. In exchange for this generous gift, the Agency purchased a large number of Uzi machine guns that were considered the best "survival" weapon at the time.

From the beginning of the H-34 program our crews were able to draw military hand-me-downs from the supply department. Over the years, and with the advent of used USAF equipment, these items ranged from bulky survival kits that contained a folding .22 rifle to dirty, worn-out flak vests, to more recent vintage survival vests with flares and UHF/VHF radios. Now, if we desired, crews could check out an Uzi when scheduled for upcountry work. Of course, the recipient was responsible for whatever he signed and would be docked pay if an item was stolen or lost.

On a local basis, for years, assuming personal weapons were strictly employed for upcountry use, management had established a wink-wink laissez faire attitude toward individual preference and storage of bagged personal weapons in our lockers. This had been Base Manager Ben Moore's and other management personnel's tacit unwritten policy at the Udorn facility even before the commencement of the extra hazardous SAR period. Maintaining weapons under lock and key at the airfield was preferable to taking them into town, where they might be seen or even abused, leading to incidents with the local Thai, as what had occurred in the very early days, and led to the official weapons ban. Following the 1962 drunken cowboy incident shooting the Thai King's picture in town, only one person had been terminated for weapon misuse. In both cases the men were reported by a local Thai man, so drastic action had to be taken by Air America officials because of affected Thai sensitivities in a land where we were considered guests of the government, and our continued presence depended on positive deportment.

One day, AB-1 personnel drove some of us to the Thai Border Patrol (BPP) firing range on the western side of town for an abbreviated Uzi briefing and weapon familiarization. Although compact, the gun was a bit heavy, but highly touted as a

formable weapon accommodating a fifty-round magazine. Standing in the attack mode, I pointed the Uzi toward the target, unlocked the safety, and pulled the trigger, using the fully automatic feature. I expected a chatter of multiple rounds, but only one .45 caliber bullet exited the barrel. Re-chambering provided an additional pop. That was it. Whatever I did to help clear and chamber rounds failed to activate the weapon. The Customer could provide no answer to the problem. Since I had received substantial weapons training at Quantico with numerous guns and felt comfortable with them, it was an unimpressive, frustrating experience. Perhaps I had been issued a flawed piece, but the episode was enough to dissuade me from thoughts of carrying an Uzi upcountry. When push came to shove and I was braced between "a rock and a hard place" with the Indians charging, I had to have a reliable, long-range weapon to win the day. Therefore, despite its weight and bulkiness, I elected to continue carrying my cased AK-47 and five full magazines (one-hundred rounds) in the cargo section. A proven combat assault rifle that I had fired and encountered no problem, the Kalashnikov provided more range, foot pound inertia, penetration capability, availability of ammunition, and respect by military services of all nations.

Shortly after the Smith incident Mike Jarina was discussing with Father Luke Brouhard at Sam Tong the measures to take if forced down. Known as the walking priest of Laos, Father B had always provided a wealth of intelligence and excellent advice over the years regarding enemy locations and how to evade his work areas. One of the suggestions Luke offered Mike was to carry an AK-47 or Soviet SKS, for abundant ammunition was always

available in enemy territory. ¹⁵

KNIGHT

In addition to his office duties, Wayne conducted many local area pilot training and proficiency check (PC) rides during the month of January. Many pilots, representing new generation helicopter pilots, were fairly recent hires; others represented Company seasoned aviators. As usual, training or PC rides were often combined with test flights of aircraft released from maintenance. There was some allowance in the Madriver contract for periodic training and check rides, but employing this method did not tax the system too much.

Bert Rolston (DOH 12/10/69) was the first check ride on the third in Hotel-69. Bert soon opted for the FCF program rather than fly the line.

Thai Captain Boonrat and "Pogo" Hunter followed five days later in Hotel-39 and Hotel-66.

Proficiency checks continued the following day, with Fred Fram (DOH 11/01/69) in Hotel-66 and Bob Swartz in Hotel-52. ¹⁶

¹⁶Segment Sources:

Air America Aircraft Accident Review for XW-PFF, 06/17/70.

Joe Leeker, *The Aircraft of Air America*, for Les Bays Porter Side Number, N358F.

Les Bays Account of the Incident.

French Smith, *Mayday, Papa Foxtrot Foxtrot*, Remember When Department *Air America Log*.

Mike Jarina Interviews at his Home in Milton, Florida, and at the Author's House in Metairie, Louisiana.

Wayne Knight Emails, 10/18/00, 10/20/00, 10/22/00.

Central Intelligence Message-Priority Vientiane (some items redacted), 01/17/70.

Terry Bolstad, *Skyraider Stories*, Email 06/02/68.

Bob Arnau, *Skyraider Stories*, Email 01/28/98.

Arnau, 21st SOS Knife Tales, 07/04/05.

¹⁶ Records permitting, the Author will list the date of hire (DOH) for those employees who flew out of Udorn in 1970.

On Saturday, Danny Kawalek (DOH 10/18/69) had a proficiency ride in Hotel-59.

The next day, Don Franks (DOH 08/31/66), another Saigon Bell transfer underwent training in Hotel-76. Unlike some of the other Bell pilots from South Vietnam, Don lacked sufficient seniority to immediately enter our Bell program. Therefore, he was assigned to H-34s and was obliged to complete a full H-34 checkout in addition to the upcountry familiarization process of all military regions.

Don's unusual history preceded him. Reputedly, one day he left the house, telling his wife that he was going to the corner store for a pack of cigarettes. Don never returned home and ended up with Air America in South East Asia. However, he regularly sent money to his family. I had never heard such a story before.

"Sandy" Sandt (DOH 12/29/69) recently arrived in Udorn from the Taipei check-in orientation, and was also was in line for training in Hotel-69. His wife was hired to teach school. Wayne was not impressed with Sandt, and would refer to Sandt as being somewhat "flakey."

The drill continued on the 16th with Herb Baker receiving a proficiency check in 148805 (formerly CIC-2) after maintenance rolled the machine out of the hangar. On the same day, Franks was upgraded to second in command (SIC), or First Officer status, and released for upcountry work with a senior pilot.

Saturday, the day Frenchy Smith was shot down, since double crewed Bells were envisioned as the Plain of Jars operation became more hazardous, Bob Davis began transition flights in the Bell.

Three days later, big John Fonburg flew a proficiency check with Knight in Hotel-39.

On the 22nd, Larry Henesy was accorded a semi-annual check ride in Hotel-74. The same day, while flying Hotel-32, Sandt was upgraded to second-in-command (SIC).

The following day FG Steele (DOH 12/10/69) endured a check ride in Hotel-57.

Bill Foster (DOH 11/05/69) followed on Saturday in the same aircraft.

Old timer JJ McCauley began Bell 205 transition training on the 26th in XW-PFJ. Little did JJ know what shortly lay in store for him in the Bell.

A new pilot by the name of John Beardsley began training in CIC-6 and Hotel-32. He was upgraded to second in command (SIC) on the 29th, for upcountry training and familiarization.

Ed Rudolfs underwent his proficiency check on Thursday.¹⁷

UPCOUNTRY

"The PDJ is getting touchy again and we are losing ground. I am sure you read about Pakse.¹⁸ I don't know too much myself yet but will try and find out. Also, Ubon AFB was attacked by a small force. I don't think congress should have said that they wouldn't commit ground troops here. The enemy has become bolder since that statement came out."

01/18/70 Letter Home.

On the twentieth I began a six-day stint upcountry. I deadheaded to Long Tieng on 96W after the ship was released from a maintenance inspection and determined airworthy. Since the

¹⁷ EWKnight Email and Flight Records, 11/26/00.

¹⁸ The L-11 airfield was rocketed on 9 January. Attacks were generally confined to the airfield.

crew of 12F was working out of LL, I rode to the Plain of Jars strip on a Caribou 430 shuttle, and waited. The current news regarding the military situation was not good from the Customer. Our little guys were being pressured, but, except for the loss of Phou Nok Kok and a few forward positions, they were holding in the northern sector. Attempting to hold the Nong Pet (7/71) and Lat Bouak (71/74) road junctions, Vang Pao was reinforcing and striking back with the few assets he possessed, while continuing to solicit additional battalions from other military regions. Of course, it was Air America and CASI STOL pilots, and our job to supply these positions with mostly air drops, sling loads, and the occasional landing.

COURTNEY

Savannakhet's Blue Battalion had been situated on three commanding hills in the northeastern sector of Nong Pet. After serving two obligatory months in the field, the unit was replaced by Savannakhet's Brown Battalion, overseen by Military Region Three Case Officer, Bob Batteiger.¹⁹

Both Blue and then Yellow SGU Battalions had participated in the 1969 Junction City Junior Operation, but contrasted as to ability and courage. At the time of the operation, Brown's name was Yellow. However, after departing the field under less than outstanding circumstances, the unit was reformed and re-designated Brown to allay the negative and uncomplimentary connotation of Yellow Battalion. The unit was commanded by Colonel Boun Mark, with Captain Champatong his second.

¹⁹ The Author met Bob Batteiger a few years ago when he was in the city with former Air America H-34 helicopter pilot Jim Spillis during a Mardi Gras season. He mentioned that Don Courtney had replaced him as a Military Region Three Case Officer, but the quiet fellow revealed nothing of his participation in the Plain of Jars operation.

In January, Batteiger's contract tour was nearly complete and he was preparing to rotate to the USA. Therefore, Don Courtney, who had worked on the AB-1 Military Region Two desk at the White House headquarters since mid-1969 and assisted as a floater in the Plain of Jars operation as required, was assigned Case Officer of Brown Battalion. While "snapping in," he overlapped Bob by one or two days. ²⁰

During the few weeks he had with the battalion, Don occasionally accompanied supply efforts to Brown landing zones northeast of Nong Pet. One day he was onboard an H-34 from Lima Lima, bound for a Brown company position with a load and to assess the unit's needs and gather current intelligence. After landing, he stowed his Stetson hat behind the bucket seat and helped the Flight Mechanic unload rice and other supplies. Then he talked briefly with the officers and examined their maps. After departing, he noticed that his hat was missing. ^{21 22}

By the time 12F returned to Alternate and was refueled it was midafternoon and I only flew a little more than one fuel load and returned to Site-20A for the night. Tod Yourglich and Robbie Robertson arrived late--Tod to replace Len Bevan, Robbie

²⁰ At this time, Don Courtney was unaware of Yellow Battalions' aka Brown's perceived cowardice evidenced during Junction City Junior.

²¹ After the position was overrun, some of the troops were captured. Much later, a youth approached Don at Savannakhet claiming that he had been captured, escaped, and was owed back pay. Don dug through old payroll lists, discovering that indeed, the individual had not been paid for the two months he was missing. Don paid and offered him a job in his battalion, but he had already committed to another unit.

During the period they were engaged, Courtney mentioned the hat incident. Much to his surprise, the chap said the troops had seen the hat sailing out of the helicopter, but attempts to recover it failed.

²³ Don Courtney Emails, 08/31/02, 12/17/13, 12/18/13, 12/19/13, 12/20/13, 01/05/14.

to supplement the cockpit crew for a Special Mission the following day.

The two-aircraft exfil mission at UH6144 took us deep into Houa Phan Province. With the aid of the Customer in a Porter, the man was found on high ground between the former sites of Houei Ma (LS-107) to the north, Houei Moun (LS-211) to the west, Nhot Phat (LS-179) to the east, and Houa MOUNG (LS-58), to the south. Since there was no "need to know," I never discovered the man's mission. ²³ I knew only that we retrieved him between Phou Pha Thi and Route Six. He was a good distance from either of these places, so perhaps he had been moving away from his initial target, or possibly was querying local villagers still left in the area as to enemy dispositions and movements.

After the mission I dropped Robbie off at LL and resumed "normal" ²⁴ work to the north and east.

Vang Pao got his wish for reinforcements on Thursday, when Military Region Commander General Phasouk allowed Two SGU battalion's return to the Plain of Jars battle. The Pakse battalion was dispatched by large fixed wing to LL. Since enemy pressure was greater in the Xieng Khouang Valley and further east, where a Meo guerrilla unit was being pounded by artillery, the SGU battalion was redeployed to the Lima-03 area. While this movement was underway, I was shuttling troops and supplies into northeastern hill positions overlooking the valley. During the months of the Plain of Jars operation I had worked these sites and those twenty-one miles further east on the commanding ground at Phou Nam Phong overlooking Route-72. An alternate LOC parallel to the heavily bombed Route-7, the enemy was anxious to

²³ For obvious reasons, we rarely knew the object of a mission.

²⁴ Normal: Really a misnomer, there was actually no work that could be classified as normal in Laos at this time, only some less demanding than other tasks.

complete this artery west toward Xieng Khouang Ville and the eastern Plain of Jars.

During previous forays working east during gentler, kinder times, just to say I had done so, late one day while looking for our patrols, I flew farther east to and along the North Vietnamese border at medium altitude. Constituting a first for me, the remote area appeared to be entirely devoid of humans. Even though I was able to accomplish this without incurring ground fire, I knew it would likely be my last opportunity to fly in the area. Since it was a region of dubious radio coverage and no other aircraft were near to assist in case of trouble, I should have known better. But that was what the job was all about: taking chances and calculating risks.

When shuttling between LL and Xieng Khouang Ville, I developed an enhanced feel for our Bell's fuel gage readings in regard to range and endurance. The fuel gage calibration was important, for at lower fuel states, I could measurably increase the payload. Depending on the Huey, I could work my fuel load so low, that knowing exactly how long it would take me to fly the twenty miles or so to LL in a no-wind condition, I could easily return on a low-level fuel warning light. This knowledge would serve me well in the future.

In addition to the Pakse battalion, a mixed Lao Theung-Meo Special Guerrilla battalion arrived at LL from Military Region One on the 22nd. Under pressure for additional bodies for his operation, Vang Pao had previously appealed to Moua Sue, son of Bouam Long commanding officer Cher Pao Moua, to scour the hills for men and boys willing to temporarily leave their homes to help defend the Plain of Jars. The highlanders were hastily trained at the Xieng Lom (LS-69A) SGU center, established in late 1967 by both Agency and RTA instructors. In addition to the Thai detachment, Agency Case Officers employing talents of Lao

instructors from PS-18 in Military Region Four and Whiskey-3 in Military Region Three, were periodically assigned there. All were relegated to Tony Poe's oversight.

After reaching LL, elements of the battalion either walked or were lifted to forward positions to block enemy attempts to infiltrate toward Site-22.

As per Customer request, we waited for the all clear to launch for LL in the morning. ²⁵ We were flying higher now and exercising more caution since Smith was shot down. Moreover, each day I wondered how long the exposed site would remain viable. Stress levels were high. Also, especially after the sapper attack on the 17th, there was anxiety and speculation as to when our hostel would be hit while we were sleeping. Against that scenario, we had access to additional weapons and roving guards assigned to protect us, but they consisted of mostly young kids. Moreover, the hostel's exposed position at the top of the parking ramp guaranteed little overall safety from a determined attack. In addition, the hostel was raised a couple feet above the hardtop, making it easy for a sapper team to hurl a satchel charge or grenade underneath the wooden structure. Largely negating any immediate help, a considerable distance separated our hostel from the Customer's headquarters and housing on Sky hill. Another negative, if we ventured outside in the pitch-black night and attempted to approach our aircraft, we were sure to provide tempting targets for both sides. The upshot of the matter was to remain in the hostel, rely on our own devices and Meo help in case of trouble.

Jack Knotts joined Tod and me on the 23rd. Jack had arrived from Saigon in late December and was still getting his feet wet

²⁵ The term Customer could have connoted an American or Meo in air operations.

under actual combat conditions before being released on his own. The situation increasingly warranted double-crewed Bells for missions that required immediate reinforcement or extraction of wounded at forward positions. With two pilots to share cockpit duties, activity during a nine-hour day did not drain adrenalin or tax one's physical status quite as much as flying solo. Of course, the ability to relax depended on the individual performing in the left seat. Since most of our Bell pilots were Captains and very competent, this was not the problem it had been at times in the H-34 program.

During the day, one Special Mission was mounted out of LL to the Rocket Mobile position in the hills on the north side of Route-71.

From aerial recon and spies on the ground, it was well known in intelligence offices that a rested and refitted Vietnamese division was massing to commence the final phase of the Plain of Jars counteroffensive. Therefore, to stall or prevent these units from marching, on the 23rd, at the urging of his Country Team consisting of AIRA, ARMA, CIA advisors, staff, and the Prime Minister, Ambassador Godley requested Washington to authorize B-52 strikes in Military Region Two. Despite Godley's entreaty, normal governmental discussion, and a large degree of stonewalling prevailed. At a time when timely B-52 strikes might have ameliorated the ensuing battlefield situation and saved lives, nothing was done. State's decision was astonishing, for from the beginning, and particularly toward the final days, one concept revolved around concentrating enemy forces for destruction by air. What better time and opportunity than now, when division sized units were forming to attack? Moreover, bombs were indiscriminately dropped on the trails with doubtful results. The decision not to bomb at this time was just another example of the politics of waffling by rear echelon

civilians that plagued the Second Indochina War, a war that should have been concluded long before.

For the next two days Jack and I worked long hours together supplying bullets, beans, and bandages to our defenders.

Late Sunday afternoon we were told to RTB Udorn for 12F's scheduled maintenance. ²⁶

On Wednesday, the 28th, following two full days at home trying to relax and recharge my internal batteries, I was on the flight schedule for another stressful period upcountry. I boarded Hotel-45 for the lengthy ride to Long Tieng that included circumnavigating weather. Since my ship and crew was working at LL, I continued to the site on the same H-34. Since a Special Mission was planned which required escort, now required to be exclusively Air Force because of the obvious language problems conversing with non-English-speaking ethnic pilots, I joined Robbie Robertson and Flight Mechanic Daniels in 96W to perform local work until the scheduled launch time.

Vang Pao was still pushing his troops to retake lost ground or block movement west from Phu Nok Kok and Ban Thang, an enemy rally point on Route-7 east of Nong Pet. Fighting had been particularly fierce in the Ban Thang area, resulting in many casualties. The mission, a multi-helicopter exfil of at least four aircraft, required us to extract an estimated eighteen dead and wounded from UMT coordinates UG375626, in the hills on the south side of Route-7, two miles west of Ban Thang, and five miles southwest of old Black Lion.

Late in the day Captain Ed Reid, Don Leach, and Bobby Barrow led the gaggle in Papa Foxtrot Hotel. While passing the Nong Pet junction at altitude with A-1E escort, we observed a

²⁶ Ken Conboy, 251-252, 316.
Tom Ahern, 334.

single H-34 pilot well below us landing at a pinnacle just to the north of and overlooking the 7/71 split. The area was quite active at the time and we did not conduct supply missions or land at that particular landing zone without benefit of air cover. We called and discovered it was Boonrat, who had been sweet-talked into landing there by an unscrupulous Customer. Raised in a culture that attempted to avoid negative issues at all costs, Thais were reluctant to say no. Using this rationale, some Customers, aware that unlike American pilots, they could talk the Thai pilots into performing anything, took advantage of this. This had happened at Moung Phalane with disastrous results in December 1967, when Captain Sarisporn, responding to the wishes of an overly enthusiastic Customer, was shot down and spent the night in the weeds before Ed Reid came to the rescue.

In all fairness, missions normally required time to organize and supply the correct assets, but we had learned our lesson the hard way and our SOPs had evolved for a good reason: survival of machines and men. So far, we had never had anyone killed on a mission, and we desired to continue this trend. Moreover, it grated on us that a self-serving, hard charging Customer had talked one of our own pilots into what was considered a Special Mission, particularly with the French Smith incident fresh in everyone's mind. We all liked the Boon boys and did not want anything to happen to them. Boonrat was an old timer and should have known better. He would need an old fashion talking to.

Because of the large number of casualties and a small unimproved landing zone, only one ship at a time could land, load and depart. Therefore, other crews had to orbit to the south and wait their turn. We accomplished the task with no incidents, but the mission required more than an hour and a half to complete. The Meo KIA and WIAs were delivered to the Sam Tong

hospital. Wounded were triaged and culled for treatment; dead were later transferred to their home villages, where customary firing of guns and sadness prevailed.

His upcountry stint complete, Robbie left for home later that afternoon, leaving Daniels and myself to the supply and outpost reinforcement work from LL the following day.

MiGs

Enemy air defenses along the miles of eastern supply trails had drastically increased since the Lyndon B Johnson Administration ordered a bombing halt over North Vietnam in the fall of 1968. By 1970, the anti-aircraft artillery, including some surface to air missile sites (SAM), were now estimated at between 600 and 700, from an original 200.

Airborne and ground intelligence sources indicated that enemy infiltration from North Vietnam into South Vietnam was increasing, with large numbers of troops and equipment moving along the Lao trails into Cambodia and Laos.

Along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, ²⁷ trucks were observed moving in forty to sixty battalion-sized convoys through the six border passes. The trails were composed of many bypasses and sub-segments. These were monitored and directed by leaders who routed traffic based on information including passable routes.

Over time many varied U.S. aircraft were employed in the interdiction process. Since most enemy traffic moved during the hours of darkness, B-57 bombers were used as FAC and strike conduits at night, along with B-26 and A-6 planes. Cargo planes, such as the C-47, C-119, and C-130, were retrofitted with a mix of weapons to become nighttime gunships.

²⁷ Americans referred to the enemy LOCs as the Ho Chi Minh Trail; the North Vietnamese as Truong Son.

Daytime interdiction missions by jets out of various bases in Thailand and South Vietnam concentrated on destroying AAA positions and closing roads at chokepoints where traffic might be backed up and demolished.

On 28 January, while attacking a SAM site in the Mugia Pass area of the Panhandle, an F-105 jet was downed. The wingman of Seabird 02 observed the crew ejecting into the foothills.

Four Jolly Green helicopter crews, 70, 71, 72, and 77, accompanied by Sandy A-1s, 01, 02, 05, and 06 approached the area from the northwest at 10,000 feet to commence the SAR.

Several MiG calls were heard over the radios, but the USAF personnel were unfamiliar with the reference point CRAB, which was actually fifteen miles north of the group. Suddenly, Jolly Green 71 disappeared in smoke as two Soviet style MiGs soared through the orbiting formation and immediately departed after completing their dirty work. Panic ensued, as all hands dove for the deck while scrambling west toward home plate.

We were shocked when we heard of the downing. MiGs were always a threat to airmen who flew at altitude, but not one that we factored into our low flying operation. Despite a purported MiGCAP cover the Air Force provided, like the AN-2 Colts at Phou Pha Thi, enemy aircraft could sneak undetected into our operating area any time they desired, but there was no absolute guarantee of a successful egress. Just flying to the border areas without penetration was sufficient to spark a reaction and a minor disruption to our operations without risk. We did not want to think about the implications of their presence too much, but the threat was real, something we could not forget or easily cope.

AIR SUPPORT IN MR-2

In 1970 administration of U.S air operations in northern Laos (MR-2) was managed by both often contentious civilian and military personnel located in three countries-South Vietnam, Thailand, and Laos. With the extended and convoluted chain of command, diverse commands distilling intelligence and directing varied portions of the war, and the yearly military tours plaguing the system with newbies lacking experience in the Theater, it was a miracle that air operations in critical portions of Laos achieved any successful results. But thanks to individual efforts, they did.

Calling on the expertise of his multi-agency Country Team associates in the offices of ARMA, AIRA, and CIA, Ambassador Godley managed and controlled all U.S. activities in support of the Royal Lao Government. This included the American participation in the air war. The U.S. Military Assistance Command (COMUSMACV), located in Saigon, planned, scheduled, and implemented Godley's requests. Deputy Commanding Officer United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam (DEPCOMUSMACV) at the same location commanded and controlled 7th Air Force assets out of the regional facility. The Deputy Commanding Officer of 7/13th Air Force at Udorn, Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB) managed his division and also coordinated directly with Agency officials, Air Attaché (AIRA), and Godley in the Vientiane Embassy. Helping to interface between agencies and improve coordination and cooperation in Military Region Two, meetings were held twice monthly at 7/13 headquarters Udorn by the Barrel Roll Working Group to anticipate, smooth over problems, and plan monthly airpower allocations.

USAF jets and propeller driven aircraft from Thailand bases supported the Military Region Two (Barrel Roll) war. Fueling

tankers were on station to supply the jet F-105 and F-4 planes flying out of Udorn, Korat, Takhli, and Ubon. A-1 reciprocating aircraft and CH-53 Jolly Greens flew from Nakhon Phanom to support and implement SAR efforts. Other support was accomplished by Air Force transports and helicopters, as was the airlift from AID and Agency-controlled aircraft.

As per the established rules of engagement (ROE) tailored to minimize civilian casualties, almost all visual Air Force strikes were directed and controlled by airborne Raven forward air controllers (FAC) piloting O-1, T-28, and U-17 planes from Vientiane and Long Tieng. FAC control also was conducted by F-4 crews (called "Fast FACs") from Korat and Udorn AFBs. A few OV-10 observation planes, call sign Nail, flew out of Nakhon Phanom.

In Military Region Two, Royal Air Force T-28 pilots operated up to ten planes from both Vientiane and Long Tieng. When necessary, T-28s from stocks, and Asian pilots undergoing training in the Detachment-1 (called Det-1 or Waterpump) facility at Udorn, created in early 1964, and their instructor pilots, were employed for various tasks in Laos.

Aiding nighttime support for friendly positions in Military Region Two, three AC-119s were assigned from Udorn and eight RLAFF C-47 gunships from Vientiane. These nighttime tasks were controlled by the C-130E Airborne Command and Control Center aircraft (ABCCC) Alleycat (north) and Moonbeam (Central). Cricket and Hillsboro controlled and coordinated daytime support in northern and central Laos respectively.

The modified six C-130E fleet carried a Ling Temco-manufactured capsule that slid in and out of the C-130. Each capsule carried twenty VHF/UHF/HF radios. Two operations officers accompanied each flight. One, a lieutenant colonel or higher rank, was accorded the title of Director of Airborne

Battle Staff. The other officer, of lesser rank, was called the Battle Staff Operations Officer. Normally this individual had fighter plane experience. Four air traffic controllers were onboard with two on duty at a time. Two intelligence specialists remained in constant contact with the FAGs on the ground, who might be Lao, but during crunch time were American.

ABCCC monitored four to 500 sorties during a twelve-hour day. Most missions emanated from the 7th Air Force frag shop, but Vang Pao had authority to validate targets. ²⁸

Long Tieng was still employed as a T-28 strike launch site, overnight parking area, and light maintenance base. The planes remained under the direct control of Vang Pao. In addition to the ten Raven pilots flying O-1E FAC missions, the operation was supported by other USAF personnel, including an AOC commander, nine NCO maintenance and weapons specialists, a flight surgeon, a radio operator, and an intelligence officer. However, Alternate was always considered a difficult place for combat pilots to land, primarily because of a challenging depth perception problem, the runway slope, and vertical obstacles at the end of the strip in the form of limestone karsts. Therefore, Moung Soui's relatively flat terrain and proximity to the fighting was a preferred forward site to stage daily T-28 activity.

By the middle of January Moung Soui was again ready to accommodate T-28 activity. Aircraft and crews from the four riverside AOCs converged on the site. Supported by daily Air America C-123 shuttles consisting of food, water, and munitions, four American military, and twenty-five Lao types conducted the ground operation. Protected locally by 120 troops, the effort was calculated to greatly reduce RLAFF T-28 Vientiane-based en

²⁸ Professor William Leary February-April 1971 notes; Interview with Colonel Robert McCutchen, USAF.

route time to and from the Plain of Jars, and to increase daily sorties, often doubling the number generated and better support the troops during the unwinding situation on the northern Plain of Jars.

However, Thai pilots with the call sign, Firefly, ²⁹ also known as the "B" Team, who formerly operated from Moung Soui during the 1968 to 1969 fighting, refused to return to Site-108 in January. According to AIRA representative, Major Jesse Scott assigned to Moung Soui:

"The Thai as a group were very professional. Although they were mercenary [hired on six-month contracts], they had a deep concern for what they were doing and did an excellent job..."

When the decision was made to reactivate Moung Soui in early 1970, it was just assumed that the Thais would once again go up there...As it worked out, the Thai politely declined because...they had lost some pilots up there. Of course, we had nothing there in the way of crash rescue or anything. It was simply a dirt strip with a tent. There was no water. We had to carry our water in. Other than that there was nothing. If a pilot crashed on landing or had trouble, the airplane flipped over for instance, there was no way to get the airplane off the man. The only thing you could do [was] take a shovel and dig him out if the airplane didn't catch fire..."

The ranking Thai...declined to go up there. Of course, I couldn't agree with him because the attaché's position was to support the ambassador in wanting the Thai T-28 drivers flying at Moung Soui. I had to try and convince him as best I could...The man [was] a knowledgeable pilot. He knew that working his pilots out of a short dirt strip with no control

²⁹ Some SAR units out of Nakhon Phanom also used the Firefly call sign.

tower, no crash rescue [was foolish.] Located a hundred miles inland, if someone did get hurt, it would take us forever to flag down an Air America airplane and get him to a hospital. He realized, of course, that it was a hazardous operation. They just declined to go up there. In fact, they would not go up there. this made a difference in the relationship.

We had more ramp space and we could fly more missions out of Moung Soui as compared to Long Tieng, so that when the Thai declined,...the Lao and the Meo moved over [from Alternate] and worked out of Moung Soui until we lost it. Then they recouped to Long Tieng." ³⁰

VANG PAO RING

"General Vang Pao, leader of the Meo people presented me with one of his special rings. It is an interesting story how it all came about. I will relate it to you some time. He also gave me a silver bracelet for Tuie"

02/04/70 Letter Home.

³⁰Segment Sources:

John Pratt, *Vietnam Voices: Intelligence Report, Headquarters 7th Air Force Saigon* (Viking, 1974), 420.

Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978) 445.

Ho Chi Minh Trails.

HH-53 History, Jolly Green-71, 66-14434, Internet.

Harry Blout, *Project CHECO: Air Operations in Northern Laos, 1 April-1 November 1970*, 01/15/71.

Clay, *CHECO: USAF Operations in Laos, 1 January 1970-30 June 1971*, 97-99, 05/31/72.

Vientiane, Moung Soui, Moung Kassy recall of the period.

United States Air Force Oral History Program, Interview #663 Major Jesse E, Scott 04/06/73, Maxwell AFB, 27-28, 35.

Ken Conboy, 254.

Military events on the Plain of Jars were accelerating at a rapid pace. There was more contact, more fierce fighting, and more casualties; hence an increased requirement for spur-of-the-moment wounded extraction.

During the morning of the 30th, we mustered at LL for a two-aircraft emergency evacuation of four WIA from UG375625. Still attempting to hold the area and prevent the enemy from breaking out to the west in force, this location was close to the Wednesday mission, but the troops had moved and were then a little east of Ban Thang.

With so much movement by both sides, the military situation was highly fluid at this time. Therefore, SOPs were altered slightly to allow helicopter crews quick reaction, and we conducted some missions single pilot when there was no opportunity or time to double crew. Because of the added risk, we were not fond of this scenario, but understood that there was little choice when human lives and troop morale were at stake. In these cases, management wisely and generally honored the senior man's decision.

Despite a certain latitude, we still adhered to the recent Company policy of using English-speaking pilots for escort. We loved Skyraider pilots for their close air support, deterrence of ground fire, and the capability of their lethal killing machines. Willing to work alongside us in the trenches, the pilots and the aircraft were flexible, capable of long loiter, and the delivery of multiple death-dealing weapons. Moreover, when they were assigned to us, we virtually never had problems with enemy fire. Even during marginal weather, A-1E pilots were generally on station in what they called "The Barrel" and could often sneak underneath a low cloud cover to aid us. Most of these guys were excellent, motivated pilots, who flew nearly every day, knew the terrain well, and would undertake risks if

deemed worthwhile. Still, they were assigned only one-year tours out of Nakhon Phanom, and it normally required a few months to adequately learn the area and become an expert. During the inception of Skyraider escort, the lead pilots had cultured voices that were calming to us during stressful missions and provided confidence that the men were experienced old timers who knew their jobs well. Now, after years of rotation and attrition, from the timbre of the voices you could tell that the pilots were getting younger, and were less likely to be highly combat experienced.

We extracted the men without incident and delivered them to the overflowing Site-20 hospital.

Later in the day Chuck Campbell radioed me to return to LL and shut down. This could only mean one thing: a Special Mission. Billy Pearson, the only other Bell pilot working in the area at the time, was also contacted to return to Site-22. I secured the Bell in the fuel/loading area and walked to a slight rise where Campbell, General Vang Pao, and his guards were congregated, huddled over a map and radio. There was not much known about the situation, but apparently there had been enemy contact and intense fighting about six miles to the northeast. There were several wounded that Vang Pao wanted recovered immediately. Morale of his men depended on this support.

In the meantime, Billy P landed. After he joined me, displaying a sour face, I explained what I knew. Then we walked a short distance away from the main group to confer and weigh the pros and cons of the situation. It appeared that SOPs would once again have to be violated. We had no Co-Captain or First Officer to accompany us in the left seat and there was no A-1E cover available at that particular time of day. General Vang Pao had offered his Meo T-28 pilots for escort. Granted, the Meo performed good close support, often superior to that of the A-1

pilots, but the language barrier was very great and it was virtually impossible to talk to them. They would be useless during a hairy situation if we needed to direct them in striking a specific target.

The language problem relating to various escort pilots had reached a crescendo when Chief Pilot Wayne Knight was involved in a mission in the Zone Steel San Tiau (LS-02) area using Chaophakhao (Lord White Buddha) T-28 pilots. During the mission he considered the Meo cover totally unsatisfactory. Air America crews could not communicate with the pilots, and he thought it would have been a complete disaster if the cover aircraft were required to help recover one of our own people. Moreover, the CPH had been receiving numerous pilot complaints regarding severe language problems. Therefore, with written testimony from pilots and personal experience to draw on, Wayne pursued the issue with AB-1 personnel. Eventually the English-speaking requirement became SOP for Special Mission escort.

Wayne had good results using A-1E pilots, but most of the missions he was involved in were preplanned, so cover had already been scheduled and was usually available when required.

Apparently, Vang Pao, considered the most important link in the system, either was not apprised of the unwritten directive for English speakers, or he chose to selectively ignore it.³¹

The new Air America management policy since Frenchy's downing specified using English speakers for this work, and was considered sacrosanct. Having only a few Bells remaining in the inventory, management was particularly sensitive about us closely following the rules and not damaging a ship. There was nothing in writing, but from the beginning of the Bell program

³¹EWKnight Emails, 10/22/00, 10/23/00.

we had flown under an umbrella of intimidation, and threats of termination for seriously dinging a helicopter. Therefore, pilot decisions and performance had better be right.

Billy P was the senior pilot, so while conferring, I deferred to his decision about conducting the mission. Another factor we considered was if there were actually bona fide wounded at the site. Many times, we had been called into such a situation by individuals who merely wanted to depart a hot spot, or to leave on R&R. However, such offenders were normally not Meo troops, and with Vang Pao ordering the mission and known as a harsh judge, jury, and executioner, the request was deemed valid.

Billy eventually decided that there were too many negatives and elected not to attempt the mission. Without considering the consequences, I agreed, and he cranked up and departed for the northwest to work the Phou Vieng (LS-6) area.

Unfortunately, I was left to confront Vang Pao with the bad news. Talking through the general's advisor, Chuck Campbell, I attempted to explain why we were unable to perform this mission. Chuck knew the situation well regarding escort aircraft policy, and diplomatically attempted to convey this to the general. However, always used to having his own way, Vang Pao wanted his men out. Not completely understanding our current policy, he became increasingly agitated. We had used his T-28 pilots before. Why not now? Trying to rationalize and explain his position, he appealed to me in broken, guttural English that nothing mattered more to troop morale than picking his people up--immediately. It was a puzzling and embarrassing situation, with me caught in the middle between Vang Pao and Air America management. I was in complete sympathy with the general, but realized the consequences should I conduct this mission without proper cover, no extra pilot, or no SAR ship. Besides, I would

be establishing a precedent and look like a fool by disregarding Pearson's decision after indicating I would abide by it.

By then Vang Pao's staff and body guards, looking ever so grim and tightly clutching their M-16 rifles, menacingly surrounded me. Precious time slipped away as I continued to refuse the mission and attempted to tactfully explain my position. But the reality or the situation was that we were on the battlefield and not in some air-conditioned office where rules and regulations were issued by rear echelon pogues.

Vang Pao chattered excitedly with his people. Then reaching a crescendo, he seemed to become even angrier, with his face turning a purplish beet red through his olive tan skin. The man looked like he was going to explode. I had known Vang Pao a long time and never seen him so angry--at least at me.

At this point Chuck advised me in a whisper regarding a possibility that Vang Pao might have me shot. That was a sobering thought. It would be the first time Vang Pao had terminated an American who failed to agree with him. However, despite the general's fiery and unpredictable nature, I was not overly concerned that he would shoot me; such an action would involve dire repercussions and consequences for him personally and his war effort. Still, these were stressful and unusual times...

Then as I was thoroughly confused, conflicted, and contemplating my next move, the general suddenly shouted magic words at me, **"If you don't conduct this mission, I am going to walk off the PDJ!"**

Whoa. That did it. All fear of the implications--being shot or fired--evaporated. I did not have to think about this new revelation very long. Despite the negatives for not following established SOPs, I could never live with the stigma of being known as the person who chased Vang Pao off the Plain of Jars.

Reluctantly, I agreed to the WIA extraction, using Meo T-28 pilots. It was amazing. Vang Pao's demeanor instantly changed and once again I was a valued asset. After obtaining his way, like a little kid's complete reversal from a tantrum, Vang Pao was happy again. We immediately conducted plans to evacuate the troops. VP would arrange for his cover assets to meet us at Lima Lima, and then apprise his people that I would soon be arriving at the forward landing zone.

About this time two H-34 pilots landed their ships at LL. JJ McCauley was one PIC. An old timer, with lots of Laos experience, I respected JJ as both a pilot and a person. After explaining the situation to him and the other H-34 pilot, I asked McCauley if he would accompany me to the landing zone in the left seat, and if the other pilot would act as our SAR ship. The extent of JJ's total Huey experience was one recent transition ride in Udorn, but without hesitation, he agreed to my proposal. What the hell, it was just another helicopter.

After an abbreviated briefing, we boarded our ships and waited for T-28 cover. As we strapped in, I hurriedly explained the workings of the Bell and what I expected from JJ should I become incapacitated or require help flying the machine.

While en route, I continued to explain variations of the Bell compared to the H-34. Without a requirement to monitor throttle manipulations, it was far easier to demand power without the same division of attention in the H-34 cockpit.

To avoid suspect enemy areas, with T-28s close abeam us, we flew a dogleg track, proceeding northeast over Route-74, and then turning east toward the front lines. It was time for major hyperventilation, maximum anal sphincter control, and final crew instructions to be especially vigilant. As we approached the narrow defile, the T-28 drivers dove for the deck and went ahead to the east, searching, trying to draw fire away from us, and

keep the enemy's heads down. It was amazing, and I wondered if their actions might result in the need for an actual SAR.

Without benefit of a recon, I drove 96W directly into a high hover over the tiny jungle landing zone, one recently hacked out of a bamboo grove on the side of a knoll. The ground was invisible, covered by a thick mat of freshly cut brush, bamboo, and other undergrowth. There was not much choice in the matter. As I descended slowly to a hover, I hoped my downwash would not blow debris up into my tail or main rotor blades. More disconcerting, the landing area was sloped to the left, which required placing the right skid lightly on the ground, while demanding sufficient power to maintain the aircraft in a level attitude. This required a little technique, avoiding excessive right cyclic to prevent the main rotor blades from striking the rotor head stops or personnel approaching the helicopter.

The men on the ground were ready, and it did not take long to load the wounded, but long enough that over the thunderous beating of my heart I could hear light small arms fire rattling close to our front. Reassuringly, the Tango pilots continued circling on the tree tops.

With Daniels and JJ providing clearance instructions, I ascended and gingerly backed up and out of the pad, while reversing my heading, and climbing for altitude. As we flew toward the Sam Tong hospital, I rehashed the mission and its implications in my mind. We had skated and avoided damage to the helicopter, therefore, because of possible complications should the mission be disclosed, I decided to keep the event quiet.

After depositing the wounded, I returned JJ to his helicopter and completed the work day at LL.

That evening at the hostel, while reliving the day's events and finishing supper, Chuck Campbell appeared at the door saying that Vang Pao wanted me to eat dinner with him. Not having been

invited to one of his repasts for some time, I was surprised and, as the only pilot invited, a little embarrassed. Still, I was curious as to what the invitation involved. Here was a guy who was going to have me shot earlier in the day for not doing as he wished; now he wanted me to eat with him. Invitations like this were only normally reserved for his staff, Case Officers, Raven O-1E drivers, and occasionally other favored pilots. It was rare, but at times we were invited to special events, like victory parties, holidays such as the Meo New Year, or prestigious marriages. These were more prevalent in the early days and we were often invited to eat with the general when living conditions were not good and principals were few in number. However, now there were just too many people in the valley and he could not afford to feed everyone. Moreover, we had our own hostels that provided good food. After we rotated to Sam Tong, and especially when Tony Poe and Vint Lawrence departed, we lost a lot of rapport with Vang Pao and the newer breed of Customer.

When asked about the occasion, Chuck was atypically close-mouthed as we walked down the long ramp and across the runway to the dining hall. The spacious room contained a long table and hard back chairs to accommodate the crowd. We were a little late, and while Vang Pao was holding court, we were obliged to sit at the only places available at the opposite end of the table. I was the only pilot present and, seemingly out of place, self-consciously wondered what I was doing there in the presence of so many officers and political leaders.

The obligatory water glass of whiskey sat in front of my place setting, but, aware of the custom, was careful to nurse my drink to avoid an instant refill. Since most of the chit-chat was in Meo and Lao, I ate, tasted the food, and talked to Chuck.

Following the meal and a few speeches that required toasting, Vang Pao presented me with a gold-plated ring with a red enameled top and royal crest with a rough diamond in the center. This item was the fabled Vang Pao ring that only a few individuals ever possessed. To my knowledge, only Ed Reid had a similar one in our organization. The general also offered me a silver and Nielloware bracelet for my wife. The gifts were in recognition of my good work extracting WIAs from the front lines that day. Although a considerable honor, I considered it ironic and silly to be feted, particularly when I had first refused a mission, and then, under considerable pressure, had agreed to conduct it against my better judgment. I wondered if there might have been something more involved in the mission of which I was unaware. Also, there was nothing for my crew. I mentioned this to Chuck, but he was noncommittal.

I felt a little sheepish and embarrassed when entering the hostel, especially when JJ and the nightly card players asked me what had transpired at the dinner. What could I say? I went to bed.

Despite the circumstances of the incident, I had what I considered another talisman and I proudly wore the ring upcountry until losing the top later during an enemy rocket attack on the valley. I never reported the mission or requested Special Mission pay. Therefore, few people knew what had actually occurred on the Plain of Jars that day. To minimize embarrassment and not sully Billy P's reputation, I kept the details close to my vest, but am not sure whether Chuck or JJ mentioned the episode to anyone.

The last day of the month was conducted much the same as before, with supply missions out of Lima Lima.

While Daniels and I worked out of Lima Lima, Knight and Goddard arrived in Papa Foxtrot Hotel to accomplish each other's semi-annual line check requirement. Moreover, the trip provided Wayne an excellent opportunity to obtain a first-hand observation of the deteriorating military situation in Military Region Two and the hazards involved for his pilots. Toward the end of the day, Wayne transferred to my ship for a ferry flight to Udorn for maintenance.

During early February Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma publicly announced a unilateral proposal for the warring parties to neutralize the Plain of Jars. North Vietnamese leaders seemed interested in pursuing discussions regarding this suggestion, but analysts posited that the enemy was only interested in creating a temporary lull in the intense bombing to allow its troops to retrench and regain territory. Not a popular concept with USG, as a carrot, Souvanna also indicated that he would disregard enemy activity on the Trail systems and request a cessation of air strikes along the border of southern Laos if the communists would withdraw all their troops from the rest of the country.

A relatively, but disquieting lull in hostilities existed around the Plain of Jars, while Vang Pao's patrols reported large numbers of enemy troops moving southwest of the Plain. This movement was considered a ploy to encourage Vang Pao to withdraw some troops from the northern front to protect his headquarters and refugee base at Long Tieng.

Vietnamese battalions had also been observed moving toward the Plain from the northwest.

Intelligence centered on the supposition that a Vietnamese offensive to overwhelm the RLG defenses on the Plain of Jars with superior numbers was being delayed until all their forces were marshaled and firmly in place. ¹

CONTINUING MASSIVE EVACUATIONS

Because of a multi-division enemy offensive expected by mid-February, certain to recapture the Plain of Jars from grossly undermanned and demoralized government forces, a decision was made by American officials, and approved by General Vang Pao, to begin evacuating civilians from the southern portion of the Plain. The operation marked a far more ambitious effort than January's evacuation conducted at Moung Soui. Multi-day lifts would begin relocating an estimated 7,000 people from Lat Sen (LS-276) to other suitable areas or camps on alluvial flatlands at Ban Keun, adjacent to the Nam Ngum (LS-44) and near Vientiane. Refugees were met at Wattay Airport and delivered to reception centers for classification and processing according to ethnicity. Then they were transferred to rudimentary housing in villages along the Mekong River. According to one correspondent:

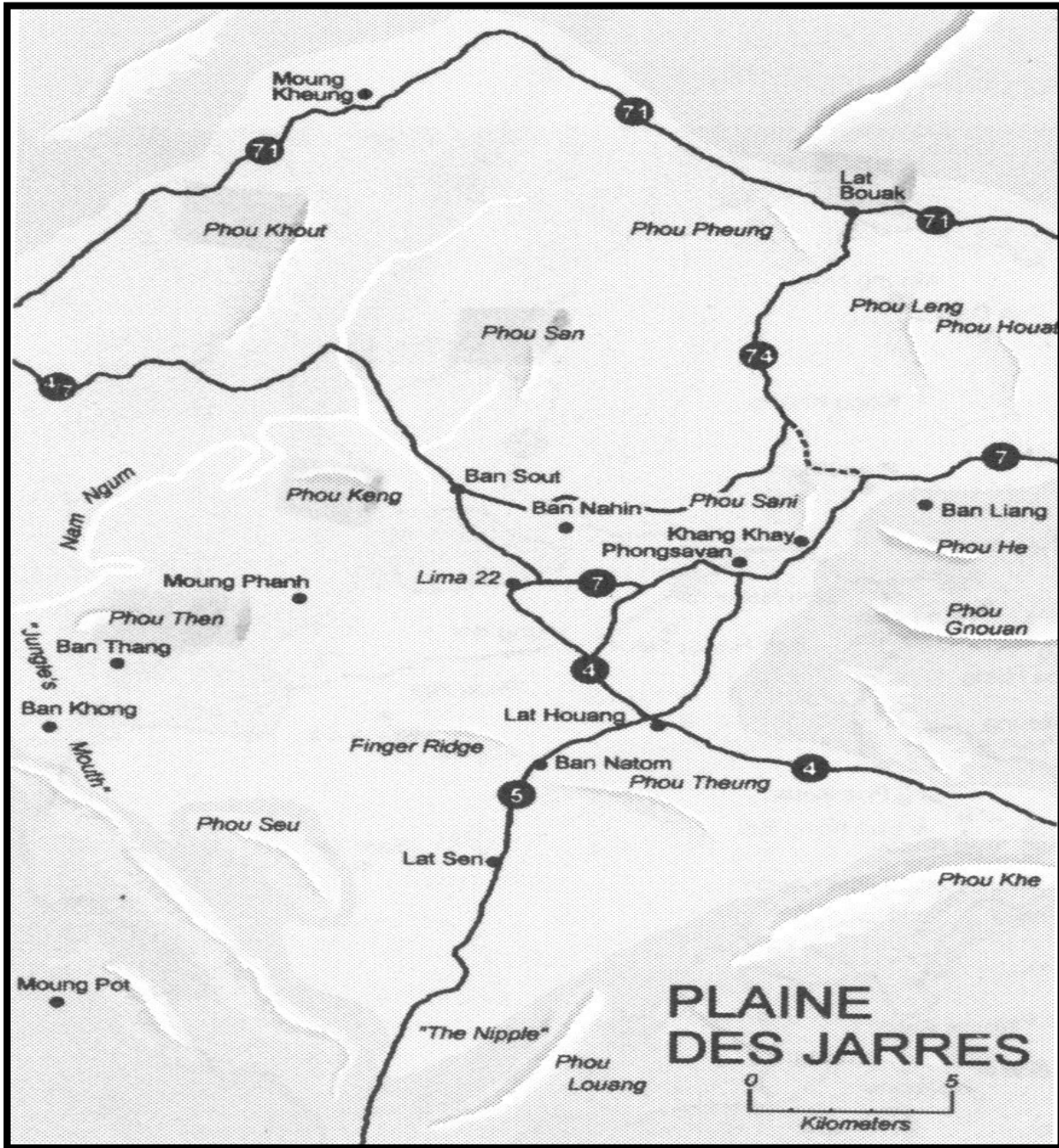
"...they seemed happy to be away from the guns; some of them had been living in caves..."

When Lat Sen was empty another round of even more ambitious evacuation flights commenced at the Ban Thang (LS-275) airstrip.²

Plans for the evacuation were disclosed to world news outlets. Therefore, newspapers in the States published details for the public several days prior to the actual operation. The *New York Times* reported:

¹Central Intelligence Bulletin, 02/05/70.

²16,720 souls were cited removed during the six-day operation, but numbers varied as to the total evacuated.



Graphic displaying the February Plain of Jars refugee evacuation points at Lat Sen (LS-276) and Ban Thang (LS-275)-lower center and left. Also, major roads, junctions, and other critical government elevated defensive positions are depicted.

Conboy, *Shadow War*, 432.

"...The evacuation will involve 10-15 thousand displaced persons who were settled in the PDJ after being evacuated last summer during fighting. No decision on this major population move has been made by the Lao government, the U.S is preparing air transport in the expectation such a decision is forthcoming...

Military sources estimate that 16,000 enemy troops, mainly NVA are in position in an arc running from the north to the east of the PDJ against about a third as many government troops. Another concern is that a rout of the government forces may so embolden the enemy that they would attempt an attack on Long Tieng.

While few experts believe communist forces could cross the rugged, jungle covered mountains between the PDJ and Long Tieng in sufficient force to hold the Meo centers, there is real concern that a raid in force strong enough to destroy the installations and drive off the Americans and Meo is possible.

Some diplomats are skeptical of an attack and point to the fact that despite the progress in the dry season during which the communists make their advances, no major attack has yet been launched or seems imminent. They suspect the Americans of seeking to justify a continued high level of bombing and military assistance in Laos..."

Working during daylight hours, the operation commenced on the fourth and continued full-bore until 10 February. Air America supervisors were assigned as air controllers on the PDJ and other places where refugees were gathering. A majority of refugees were moved by larger Air America fixed wing, but smaller planes such as Air America and CASI Porters participated during return trips from local outposts. No records exist of how many people were carried by these smaller planes.

Special permission was requested and approved to employ USAF C-130s. Pilots flew into Long Tieng, where they

relinquished command to Air America aviators checked out in the planes, who continued the evacuation.

Records of the C-130, C-123K, and C7A refugee and household item manifests were maintained for posterity.

The scorched earth policy in Military Region Two was generally considered a resounding success. Most of the population was removed, along with all their rice and livestock that were driven into the hills. Villages were destroyed. In addition to removing the food supply, the Vietnamese would be denied the opportunity to conscript people to haul their ammunition and supplies toward the ultimate goals of Sam Tong and Long Tieng.

On the down side, removal of the population would deny Vang Pao critical and current intelligence about enemy intentions and movements.

Within ten days Caribou crews were assigned to deliver refugees from Xieng Khouang Ville strip to Moung Cha for relocation. During *"16 sorties, 330 refugees and military personnel and 9,000 pounds of cargo"* were carried. ³

In a broad statement to the Author, Blaine Jensen, Sam Tong USAID representative, had positive things to say about the participation of airplane crews who flew the refugee rice drop operation. He considered them the unsung heroes during the 1970 refugee evacuations. They risked bad weather, fake signals, and enemy fire. Other problems occurred when pallets, bags or rice caught on the tail empennage, and entire loads had to be jettisoned when an engine failed.

At the height of the refugee problem, the big bird pilots fed a half-million people from the air through rain, smoke,

³ Air America's Role in Evacuation Operations in Laos-1970.

haze, and enemy so close they barely had room to turn the lumbering aircraft around for the next run.

Jensen considered the large picture as opposed to pieces. He claimed that was the way AID looked at problems. For pilots, each flight was one mission, whereas for Blaine, every day he attempted to coordinate an overall operation containing thousands of facets. This consumed his day and a good portion of the night. ⁴

UPCOUNTRY IN MR-1

Since mid-December 1969, Ambassador Godley and his Embassy cohorts touted commencing military action against the Chinese Road in the Nam Beng Valley. This would take the form of relatively innocuous over flights and small guerrilla unit operations to cut the road. However, his request for the dry season action was not granted. Then he switched gears and proposed a more modest plan for only a road watch operation.

While waiting for a Washington reply, during the first week in January, unsanctioned by Souvanna Phouma, a successful air strike by RLAF T-28 Thai pilots discovered and destroyed fifteen vehicles in a truck park containing rolling stock supporting construction projects along the road.

Within a week, Godley's request for a blocking action was approved. However, this was delayed for six months pending training and deployment of an appropriate unit.

⁴*New York Times* Article Dateline Vientiane, 01/31/70.
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 252, FN 26, 259.
CIA Memorandum, Air America role in evacuation operations in Laos-1970.
Air America Log, Air America's Laos Airlift, Volume 4, #3 1970.
Blaine Jensen Letter.
Tammy Arbuckle, *Washington Star*.

By mid-February, perhaps in response to the Thai attack, both the estimated antiaircraft artillery (AAA) guns and the number of Chinese troops dramatically increased in the Beng Valley. The AAA sites were mostly concentrated in the Moung Sai, Moung La areas and along sections under construction leading south toward Moung Houn. In addition to protecting important bridges, the weapons also guarded bivouac areas, storage sites, and construction camps.

I was supposed to return to the field on Wednesday, the fourth, but did not actually commence the movement until Thursday. If not flying one's own ship, northwestern Military Region One continued to be a most difficult place to deadhead. Consequently, it took almost a day to reach Site-69. After riding to Wattay Airport on C-123 4576, I transferred to Continental Airline Services (CASI) Beech Baron N1313Z for an hour flight to Luang Prabang. ⁵ From the royal capital, I obtained a ride on 62G to Xieng Lom (LS-69A), where I waited to relieve the Captain of 12F. I only flew one mission before recovering at Ban Houei Sai for the night. Since Nam Yu afforded few of the amenities which the Air America hostel provided, we rarely RON at Site-108A. This had the effect of not establishing the favored Customer rapport-many were newly arrived on the scene-which we had enjoyed in the early days with Tony Poe and his cohorts.

Although work in Military Region One was considerably less stressful than that encountered during the deteriorating Plain of Jars situation, I was not especially enthralled to have been sent to the area, and was unfamiliar with the current situation.

⁵ CASI had no 123s or C-7 Caribous in its inventory, but had been awarded the contract for most Porter work in Military Region One.

Moreover, by missing the day-to-day action on the Plain of Jars, I feared missing something essential to my survival.

I had not worked the northwestern Military Region One region for some time, and wondered about the need of using a Huey there when the Plain of Jars operation seemingly required all the assets available. I surmised the assignment had to be something to do with intelligence gathering along the all-weather Chinese Road connecting to what was formerly known as Route-46 in the Beng Valley, and communist attempts to clear the entire area of RLG military influence.

One of the sites eliminated by the enemy during their extensive clearing actions in 1970 was at Ban Nong Tong, LS-209 (also called Pak Noey), a site located six miles west of Pak Beng, a little north of the Mekong River, and eighteen miles north-northeast of Site-69A. Taking advantage of the unsettling situation, the corrupt local Commanding Officer Captain Vee Sihabout in charge of the position, was selling natives' prized ornate bronze Kha "frog" drums during the evacuation (the triple frog drum was the most favored). This fact was brought to the attention of USAID representatives Joe Flipse and Mac Thompson, while old people and pregnant women were being relocated to Ban Houei Sai and part of the load was discovered to be bronze Kha drums. From the time Mac first arrived at Ban Houei Sai, the price of the coveted frog drums had increased from thirty-five to seventy-five dollars. Strictly a violation of AID policy, Joe and Mac refueled the Porter and directed the pilot to return all the drums to Site-209. Then they remonstrated with Vee about making money from disadvantaged individuals during a stressful time.

After Major Chanpheng arrived from Nam Yu, and the site was abandoned, the remainder of the area's population and troops crossed the river into the Xieng Lom area.

It was reported that Vee later received his comeuppance when his soldiers terminated him in the vicinity of Hat Teu, where the Mekong "S" turns about half way between Pak Beng and the Pak Ou, while he was attempting to abscond with the troop's payroll.

Captain Jack Knotts was upgraded to a Bell PIC in late January. To start out flying in a less dangerous area, he was sent to Xieng Lom in 96W in early February, where he worked 713 missions for Doug Swanson, who was assigned to work at the site with three other Case Officers. Flight Mechanic Benny Shaffer, a neighbor at the Poe compound in Udorn, often flew with him. Jack RON at the Customer house that included a kitchen. Jack and Doug quickly formed a good rapport and Jack was offered an AK-47 and banana shaped magazines as a personal weapon. Jack liked the weapon, for the sound was familiar to enemy firearms as opposed to an M-16 or Uzi, which was different and would give away your position.

Jack met Tony Poe at this time. A Caribou was delivering troops for a Special Mission planned to shuttle several FAR battalions north and west of the Beng Valley. Captain Harvey Potter, along with six additional H-34 crews, arrived from Nam Yu, Ban Houei Sai, and other points, and lined up along the runway. Poe was drunk, marching up and down the strip, ordering people around and beating his chest. Harvey introduced Jack to Tony. After the pleasantries, Jack asked Potter to take a walk. Jack was concerned. As senior man in the group, according to mission SOPs, he was supposed to run the mission. However, new to the area and lacking experience, he asked Harvey to assume command of the mission. With the only Bell, Knotts recommended he assume the SAR requirement.

Over time, Knotts worked landing zones from Pak Beng upriver toward Ban Houei Sai. It got hairy working around Xieng

Lom at times. One day Jack and Bennie were shuttling locally out of Site-69. Shot at while unloading on a pad, Jack could hear rounds impacting the rear of the aircraft. Some pierced the fuel tank. With fuel pouring from holes, Jack returned to Xieng Lom, where Shaffer attempted to plug the holes. Then, with a drum of jet fuel in the cargo compartment and a manual fuel pump with a line attached to the fuel orifice, they launched for Udorn. They crossed Sayaboury Province and the Mekong when Father B called from a Meo village, "Air America, I need a ride." It was customary to provide Luke with transportation, but Knotts was not sure in this case. Still, he landed and delivered Brouhard to Vientiane. ⁶

Flight Mechanic Len Bevan and I continued to work the northwest region through the ninth, when we were recalled to Udorn. ⁷

UH-34D HELICOPTER FCF PROGRAM

As more pilots were required to support the Plain of Jars operation, former UH-34D pilots were transitioned to the Bell program. Other volunteers arrived from Saigon. Following Bell ground school, on eight February, Mike Jarina began a concentrated cross training day, first with Phil Goddard during

⁶ For safety reasons, we normally did not carry passengers during ferry flights to a maintenance facility.

⁷Mac Thompson, Emails.

John Pratt, *Project CHECO: The Royal Laotian Air Force 1954-1970*, 111, Purchased from the Dalley Book Service, Christiansburg, Virginia.

Joe Zasloff, ed., *Beyond the Revolution: U.S Policy Toward Laos in Historical Perspective* (New York: St Martine Press, 1991), Part-5 The Chinese Road in Northwest Laos 1961-1973.

An American Perspective, by McMurtrie Godley and Jinny St Goar, 287, 298, 303.

Central Intelligence Bulletin, 02/18/70.

Ken Conboy, 315.

Jack Knotts Interviews at the Author's Home.

a local FCF in Papa Foxtrot Juliet, followed by a training session with Wayne Knight.⁸

February marked the inception of the Udorn H-34 FCF program. A high demand for helicopters in the field resulted in extra hours flown, more frequent scheduled inspections, additional component changes, and a requirement for airworthiness test flights. The inspections were in addition to unscheduled maintenance from battle damage and other operational causes.

For some time Udorn office types had been swamped with flight line work. Knight recalled days when up to fifteen FCFs were conducted on a single aircraft. Notwithstanding all the really important matters, such as the war in Laos that required aircraft, it was important to maintain some continuity in the conduct of a series of FCF flights. This problem was exemplified when he left his office for the ramp to perform an engine run in procedure and instead was confronted with a vibration check. Bell tracking flights were especially challenging, often taking more than four hours.

Finding the work too demanding and costly in terms of normal office requirements, Wayne journeyed to Taipei to proffer a plan to the Vice President of Flight Operations, Don Teeters, for a Company-funded test program. However, it was rejected.

Knight returned to Udorn only minimally upset, for he had already conceived an alternate plan. There was a young captain in the Deputy Chief's office, who for some time had solicited Wayne for a favor. Therefore, Wayne offered to comply with the request in exchange for a Customer-sponsored FCF program. The back-scratching resulted in positive action and a tweaking of the Madriver contract. Knight again proposed the FCF issue to

⁸ FCF: Functional check or test flight after maintenance work.

Taipei management, this time as a Customer paying operation. In a complete reversal of upper Company management opinion, the plan was hailed as an excellent idea.

Personnel were needed for the fledgling FCF operation. As the senior pilot in the helicopter program, Tom Moher was a logical choice to head the new entity. Wayne was aware that Tom's 803 contract in Bangkok was ending and he would never fit into the line operations in Laos again. ⁹ Because of a lack of extra pay, FCF was not a popular assignment with most pilots, although Wayne was certain Tom would take the job. Moreover, he considered Moher a conscientious pilot, who would likely do a good job.

As with any pilot group, or for that matter any organization where individuals sought advancement and upper social mobility, because of petty jealousy, political ambitions, or other reasons, the Udorn helicopter program had its share of interpersonal relationship issues. This was the case in ACP Jerry McEntee's attitude toward Moher, but one not reciprocated by Tom. Both were old-timers in the helicopter program. Because of Tom's elevated Papa number on the Captain roster and friendship between the two, Jerry had been aware of Wayne's preferential treatment of Tom in the past when he was remanded to a holding pattern while awaiting a new job, rather than being assigned work in Laos.

McEntee's superiority persona might possibly have contributed to his attitude regarding Tom. Tom being from New York City was an exceptionally frank person, with a no-nonsense

⁹ Tom, always skittish upcountry, had reached the zenith of his dislike for upcountry work or combat flying in 1964 when he was nearly shot down while attempting to rescue U.S. Navy pilot Chuck Klusmann in June 1964.

approach toward others. Despite this spade-is-a spade exterior, Moher was very generous and well liked among those in our group.

While Tom was in limbo and Wayne away from Udorn, Jerry, acting in the CPH capacity, assigned Tom to a Special Mission in the Luang Prabang area. Moher refused to participate. It was not a smart thing for him to do, but he had not flown in the country for several years and the scheduling was harsh. As a result of Tom's failure to comply with the assignment, McEntee insisted on Moher's termination. It did not happen, and Tom entered the UH-34D FCF program.

The FCF work released those working in the CPH's office of onerous, time-consuming flight line duties to better concentrate on field operations.

LAST DAYS ON THE NORTHERN PDJ

On Wednesday 11 February, Flight Mechanic Bobby Barrow and I departed for Long Tieng in 96W. As expected, the major enemy offensive and concerted attacks on the northern Plain of Jars commenced, and action during the next five days marked the final phase in the battle for the Plain. Along with other helicopter crews, we continued to work out of the Lima Lima base, moving supplies to forward artillery positions around Phou Houat and Phou Houay, southwest of Nong Pet and other sites to the north of the junction. Since the enemy had been steadily moving west toward the Nong Pet 7/71 road junction, it was considered too dangerous for us to land on low ground. Therefore, troops there were supplied by Porter fixed wing drops.

Like Phou Nok Kok, the Nong Pet area did not hold long under Vietnamese pressure. That night, despite the enhanced capability to interdict the immediate road systems with artillery fire from both the north and south, Dac Cong, enemy special commando units, infiltrated friendly units. Employing

gas and a shock-flash-bang technique, they attacked the Brown Battalion Savannakhet SGU, Meo, and other FAR positions during the night. A total of eight sites came under heavy attack. As usual, during times of extreme pressure, resistance dwindled and troop discipline vanished. Lacking proper guidance, not supported by air in the zero visibility conditions, aware that the brunt of Vietnamese infantry would soon follow on the heels of the sapper attack, defenders were captured, died in place, or began moving at "high port" southwest toward safer positions.

Low cloud cover and diminished visibility in the morning stymied employment of tactical air. It enabled regimental infantry units from the 316 Division, supported by tanks and armored cars, to move into the road junction and consolidate their gains. With few remaining government forces to stop them, Dac Cong battalions continued southwest to seize Phou Houat, Phou Houay, and to capture the two artillery weapons located on the hills. In similar fashion, as the enemy consolidated control over the area, landing zones north of Nong Pet were gradually lost or abandoned. As troops withdrew north to Bouam Long, a large bore artillery piece was lost. Thus, consistent over the years whenever pressured, within a relatively short time the troops pulled back, and a majority of defensive hilltop positions overlooking Nong Pet were lost or abandoned.

Under RLG control since August 1969, the junction was lost, with the Plain of Jars subject to the same treatment. It did not appear that Vang Pao and his advisors' plans to delay a withdrawal and make the enemy pay dearly for gains would come to fruition. The site at Xieng Khouang was obviously next on the enemy agenda. With about four months left until the monsoon season, the situation did not bode well for our team.

COURTNEY

Some time before the junction was lost, an opening in Savannakhet afforded Don Courtney the opportunity to transfer there as a permanent Case Officer. Since there was a lull in the action on the northern Plain of Jars, he jumped at the chance, for it allowed him the possibility of additional field work and an opportunity to move his family from Bangkok to the Mekong town where they could all be together. Cleared by AB-1, he went to Savannakhet for a cursory look at the town, and then to Bangkok to move his family.

Don was in the process of loading a moving van when he was summoned to the U.S Embassy, where he learned from a flash message that his battalion had been ejected from its defensive positions and was headed west-southwest under acting--and able--commanding officer Champathong. Brown Battalion was scattered throughout the area and Don was ordered to return to Udorn immediately to help assist and stabilize the rapidly unwinding situation.

Don returned to the house, and under pressure, he hurriedly finished loading the van. In doing so, he injured his back. Disregarding the excruciating pain, he and the family started off on the grueling eight-hour ride to Udorn in his Toyota Corolla. After they arrived, he experienced so much pain that he went straight to bed, lying motionless on a heating pad for several days. By the time he was able to move around and perform somewhat useful work, part of Brown Battalion had moved to "safety" at Lima Lima. Then, when that site was abandoned, they moved in stages toward Ban Thang and through other disintegrating positions to Moung Soui. Following the loss of Site-108, what remained of the Brown unit reformed on the western portion of the Plain of Jars. They were back in Savannakhet by the time Don and his family relocated there.

Don worked with Brown Battalion for a few months after it was reformed. He never considered it a great unit, but improved after BounMark was cashiered. As a non-task force operation, Brown troops were assigned to guard the Phon Theiu tin mine, located in a picturesque steep karst valley northeast of Grove Jones. Don considered the move a total waste of time and resources, which his boss had provided as a favor for a corrupt political friend.

Actually, all Military Region Three Case officers floated among the various SGU units depending on what was going on. A task force for an operation would be assembled, and then one of the senior SGU officers would command it for the duration, supported by all the Case Officers. ¹⁰

MR-2 ACTION CONTINUES

The same night as the Nong Pet area was sliding down the tubes, L-22 was struck again, this time by two Dac Cong special forces companies. Under government control for several months, the supply base and FAR-FAN headquarters site had been well prepared for defense with fixed sandbagged artillery, heavy mortar, and machine gun positions, all surrounded by barbed-wire and infantry fighting holes.

Lima Lima defenses proved more than adequate, and with the help of Allied AC-47 gunships, the attack was thwarted, with the enemy incurring an estimated fifty percent or more casualties. Like U.S. Marine policy, the Vietnamese normally did not leave dead and wounded men behind, but in this case those who survived departed, leaving their buddies hanging in the wire, giving rise to the term "NVA suicide companies."

¹⁰Don Courtney Emails, 08/31/02, 12/18/13, 12/20/13, 01/08/14.

The enemy movement and attack on the site thwarted the King's plans to land, review the troops, and promote enhanced morale to the mixed forces. Instead, he wisely diverted to Long Tieng.

With weather and the military situation in limbo, the Customer did not dispatch us north until mid-Thursday morning. Because of continued fighting and air strikes around LL, and little requirement for evacuation of friendly casualties, we were temporarily kept away from the site. Instead, Vang Pao, because of contact with an enemy unit eight miles northeast, had us shuttle a few troops to a grassy hill just north of the lengthy Skyline ridgeline to form a first line of defense, including listening posts. To avoid incurring possible ground fire from roving enemy patrols reputed to be in the area, we landed in defilade on the sloped south side of the hill, so narrow it was only suitable for the skid configured Bells. Some slopes were so steep that maximum lateral right cyclic was required to keep a ship on the ground long enough for the troops to depart. Technique was tenuous, for if the rotorhead stops were contacted, bumping and vibration would occur and backing off on the cyclic risked a rollover condition.

Additionally, there was minimum head room between the rotor path plane and the hill. After Charlie Weitz's run into the unprepared site, while departing the cabin section, a dim-witted trooper scrambled upslope toward the hilltop in front of the Bell and lost his head to spinning rotor blades.

Later trips included sling loads of supplies into the positions. Accumulating light rain restricted a Bell pilot's visibility. Unlike the H-34, the Bell's large windscreen was constructed from Plexiglas material. Since the material was easily scratched by fine sand and grit collecting on the screen, and was very expensive to replace, we were cautioned not to use

the hard wiper blade that would damage the screen in light rain conditions. An obvious engineering error, the system was only efficient in heavy rain conditions when the screen was clear of debris. As an aid to flight, Billy Pearson proposed a brilliant idea to wire an unused weapons system button on the cyclic head to the wiper blade so the pilot could engage the system and clear the glass with one non damaging blade swipe.

The fix was implemented and worked well. There was only one downside: human error. The sling load pickle button was next to the swipe button, and it was ironic when the same person who proposed the refit hit the wrong button and dropped his load.

Other trips that day took me east to Xieng Khouang Ville and environs.

That night, friendly troops remaining in the hills around Nong Pet reported eight tanks, eight armored cars, and sixty troop vehicles moving south along Route-7 toward Khang Khay and the Plain of Jars.

Site-22 was considered lightly surrounded on three sides. After the fog cleared, reports collated, and the situation recorded on intelligence maps, we worked the site as intermittent mortar fire from the northwest impacted inside the huge complex. However, the rounds lacked accuracy and splashed well short of our loading portion along the runway. Outgoing artillery and mortar counter-fire attempted to silence the enemy tube, but failed. Raven pilots based at Long Tieng searched the immediate area for the target, but with numerous holes and ravines dotting the area, the clever gun crew likely moved the tube around to avoid detection. The fire appeared more like a harassing type, calculated to slow or eliminate large fixed wing supply efforts. Efforts to carry enemy dead away were underway before they putrefied in the heat, but some bodies still hung in the wire.

Defenses were beefed up at the Xieng Khouang complex. Key positions were reinforced with a second perimeter of razor wire and additional heavy weapons bunkers to further delay penetration of the compound, and to enable interlocking grazing fire and airborne gunships to break up assaulting units and slaughter as many enemy soldiers as possible. On northeastern approach trails, Customer SuperMex and his team planted antitank mines at places calculated to discourage tank movements that were deemed certain to lead a major assault.

Vang Pao had ordered his forces located to the east to begin withdrawing toward the Plain of Jars to reinforce an envisioned defensive line stretching from Phou Keng south-southeast to Xieng Khouang Ville, where government troops still held commanding high ground at Phou Gnouan and Phou Khe, hills respectively bracketing the valley northwest and southwest of Site-03. The intermediate VP line also included the hills north of LL.

With the situation becoming more critical each day, looking like "déjà vu all over again," as former New York Yankee catcher Yogi Berra was humorously wont to say, Ellis Emery joined me as a second pilot. In addition to adding a modicum of safety should the cockpit be hit by projectiles and a pilot disabled, it fulfilled the SOP for instant emergency missions.

Saturday's early morning flight activity was curtailed because of normal fog conditions on the Plain, along with a pall of haze and smoke from seasonal slash and burn agriculture. Low visibility conditions were also intensified by Allied strikes that resulted in area wide fires.

After Mike Jarina completed a local progress check in Papa Foxtrot Gulf with Wayne Knight during a FCF, he, Captain Robbie Robertson, and Flight Mechanic Bennie Shaffer departed in the same aircraft for Long Tieng via Wattay Airport. By the time

they secured for the night, they had logged about the same flight time as I had, with seven landings. ¹¹

Perhaps a Vietnamese forward observer had arrived, as accuracy of the enemy mortar crew located somewhere to the north or northwest of LL increased, and intermittent rounds were impacting closer to the strip. There were also reports of 122mm rockets being used, but I had not seen any larger explosions so far.

Because of the late start and frenzied last-minute defensive preparations on a scale that approached Site-85-Phou Pha Thi's final days, I worked late, and logged two night landings taking casualties to Sam Tong. Six outposts fell that day.

Starting work earlier on the 15th, we began back hauling dead and wounded from Lima Lima, where random nightly artillery bombardment continued exacting a minor toll on our troops in fixed positions. I began resupply and casualty extractions in the designated loading-unloading area between the runway and the Customer headquarters bunker, an ugly structure with walls lined with discarded red fuel barrels filled with loose dirt and sand bags. The roof was topped by PSP torn from the airstrip and covered by multiple layers of sand bags and dirt. It reminded me of what fortifications on the hill at Na Khang looked like.

By now, rounds from the mortar team or teams were impacting the northeastern portion of the strip. They were still relatively few in number and largely inaccurate, but I was surprised the Raven pilots, trolling strike aircraft, or counter fire had not been able to locate and eliminate the offenders. At

¹¹ As a reminder, the reader should note that because the Author did not keep many notes regarding his upcountry activity, except for recall, Mike Jarina's log entries provide an accurate account of areas and landing zones serviced by pilots. This became all the more important when Jarina transitioned to the Bell program.

Alternate briefings in an office across the runway, intelligence personnel maintained that the ravines were just too numerous to spot the weapon. Moreover, the enemy was a master of camouflage, using cover and concealment, and shooting only when not observed. I speculated that the crew-served team was working from a hole dug deep in the ground.

Our supply missions to Site-22 continued until it became obvious that mortar rounds were splashing closer to the loading point. Therefore, I apprised the stocky, heavily bearded Customer that out of safety concerns, I would no longer land at the normal area, but recommended the far end of the southwestern portion of the strip, far out of mortar range. He had use of a Jeep and could load and shuttle wounded to my position, and ammunition and supplies back to appropriate areas.

Earlier in the day, Hotel-75's engine failed at Site-22. The aircraft was left on site and the crew returned to Sam Tong. After arriving at The Alternate, a maintenance team from Udorn, consisting of Jimmy Schultz, Bob Holman, and others were inserted with tools to remove the old engine and perform a field quick engine change.

FUN IN THE SUN

The Lima Lima Customer called me late in the afternoon on his HT-2 radio to conduct a final wounded extraction that included returning some Customers to Long Tieng. At the Customer's insistence that everything was quiet and because it was late, against my better judgment, I agreed to land close to the headquarters bunker if loading was expedited and minimized to a few seconds. While approaching the landing spot, I could see the clam shell doors open on the H-34 and the maintenance team working a short distance northeast.

"...Of course, we had to go into the place under fire many times, but we were lucky. One day late in the afternoon I landed near our command bunker to pick up some wounded (previously, I had avoided this area as I felt that it was a choice spot to shell) and within seconds a 122mm rocket fell 200 yards away. It was quite a blast, so I departed with my load not knowing a trooper was still on the skid. The crew chief managed to get him in the helicopter, but not until after we were fifty feet in the air..."

02/23/70 Letter Home.

Before touching down, I reversed my heading 180 degrees toward the southwest to effect a speedy departure toward a "safe" area if necessary. It was much too quiet as opposed to earlier in the day. Apprehensive, I maintained a hundred percent RPM and collective pitch, just short of "light on the skids," ready to leap off the ground at the slightest provocation. From the rapid loading taking place, it looked like someone knew something, but they were keeping quiet. I hoped that I had not been conned.

I had a respectable load, but, low on fuel, considered the load entirely manageable. As I was raising the collective to conduct a hover check, a large explosion occurred in a ravine about 200 yards to the rear, between 96W and the H-34. Likely an exploding 122mm rocket, the shockwave was so intense that it rocked the helicopter. It was time to leave before another round--I knew from experience they were usually launched in sticks of three--arrived.

While transitioning to flight, out of the corner of my eye, I saw someone standing on the skid outside the left cargo door. Strange, as I thought everyone who was leaving was already onboard. The man was a very tall Requirements Office (RO)

American Army colonel, there to monitor the FAN. He was not scheduled to leave the site that night, but with the advent of a rocket slamming into the ground, likely changed his mind. I slowed the aircraft as Bobby pulled the chalk white-faced man into the ship, but not before we had reached fifty feet. Room was made for him, and he settled into a seat unable to talk for a while. I felt a pang of remorse at his experience, but I had not been apprised of his presence. Furthermore, the situation dictated we get "out of dodge" ASAP. Anyway, the man would have a good story to tell his grandchildren.

Concerned about the Air America maintenance crew's welfare, I circled and observed them scrambling for cover. I also noted that the rocket had landed in a small ravine, otherwise both the H-34 and our ship might have been damaged by shrapnel. Seeing us, and knowing there was an inbound flight to retrieve them, the crew waved and returned to work.

After we dropped the wounded off at Sam Tong and returned to Long Tieng, the crews of Papa Foxtrot Gulf and another Bell, taking a break from working at Xieng Khouang Ville, retrieved the Air America men at Lima Lima.

Delayed by a Special Mission, Mike and Robbie only logged half a day flight time. During the abbreviated period, they worked both the Plain and Xieng Khouang Ville areas. Mike was working the high pad at Phu Khe with a heavy load of troops. He was having problems launching and the RPM was drooping. Robbie took over and was going to show Jarina how to operate at the elevation. He tried twice and then, unable to depart, finally told Bennie to discharge some troops.

As a new Bell pilot, Mike quickly learned that turbine engine helicopters had limitations, and despite the hype, were not going to lift every load in the mountains.

By the end of the day, twenty-three regional positions had been abandoned. Moreover, having lost a final outpost northeast of Nong Pet, Vang Pao had no troop units remaining in that part of the PDJ. The enemy now controlled all the high ground with a free rein to move unimpeded in that area.

Monday, we devoted a major portion of the day to shuttling boxes of grenades from Lima Lima to a Neutralist hilltop outpost north of Site-22. The hilltop perimeter was ringed with foxholes that overlooked an east-west offshoot of Route-7. By the end of the day, eight to ten grenades were visible in front of every fighting hole. It was heartening to observe troops preparing for hand-to-hand combat, but, to my knowledge this type of fighting had never happened in defensive situations, and was rare for either FAN or FAR soldiers. Normally, the process was to advance to the rear.

Mike Jarina continued his upcountry workout in the Bell with Robbie, working at LL and Ban Thang (LS-275), only six miles southwest of Site-22. They also went to Bouam Long (LS-32), and then worked the LL area and Ban Na (LS-15).

The 17th marked our last day upcountry during this RON period. The haphazard mortaring of the LL complex appeared finished. Either our people eliminated the threat by using artillery or air strikes, or the enemy had simply run out of ammunition. At any rate, I did not believe we had seen the last of this type of indirect fire. The lack of mortar fire had been replaced by the occasional rocket (either 107mm or 122mm), calculated more as a terror device than an accurate delivery system. Moreover, the "sneaky Pete" weapon could be fired at a distance from a launch vehicle or positioned in a forward concealed location with a timed device set to send the missile soaring long after humans had vacated the area.

While working in and around the supply base, I had occasion to fly over the forward hilltop outpost, where I had delivered enough boxed grenades and other supplies to equip a relatively large army unit. The previous night, FAN troops encountered an ambush, followed by the rumble of engines and clanking tank treads in the distance. Panicked, they fled the field, causing normally effective SGU troops to do the same. I did not land, but while orbiting the position, saw abandoned grenade clusters sitting exactly where they had been placed the previous afternoon. I was disgusted with the waste and lack of intention to remain and fight.

During the day, we conducted a two aircraft exfiltration in Houa Phan Province at UH795255, southwest of Sam Neua, three miles south of Route-6, and eight miles northeast of Houa Moung. This area seemed to be a favorite extraction place for our Sam Neua road watchers. After completing the mission, we departed for home, leaving an exciting, fun filled period behind.

Scratch Kanach replaced Robertson in XW-PFG as Jarina's mentor. After the morning fog burned off or formed a low broken cloud layer in the Plain of Jars area, they followed us out to Lima Lima. For the rest of the day the crew shuttled between LL, Ban Thang, and Xieng Khouang Ville areas.

As per Kanach's policy (Robertson's also), Mike was flying from the right seat where the trainee might feel more comfortable. Rockets landed and exploded sporadically at various areas of the complex, but caused little consternation, for the terror instruments were largely inaccurate, and the operation just moved to areas of no impact.

While on the deck at one of these loading areas waiting to depart, Mike observed a parachute flare ascend in front of the Bell. Therefore, he lowered the collective to wait for the flare to pass. The metal portion of the flare descended through the

rotor blades without damage. However, it struck the helicopter, penetrated the large Plexiglas windscreen, and hit Kanach in the helmet. Scratch, believing they were under rocket attack, grabbed the cyclic and frantically began pulling pitch to depart. At the same time, Jarina pushed down on his lever, thinking if he allowed the drastic maneuver, the aircraft would end up on its back.

Scratch looked across the cockpit at Mike asking, *"What's the matter with you?"*

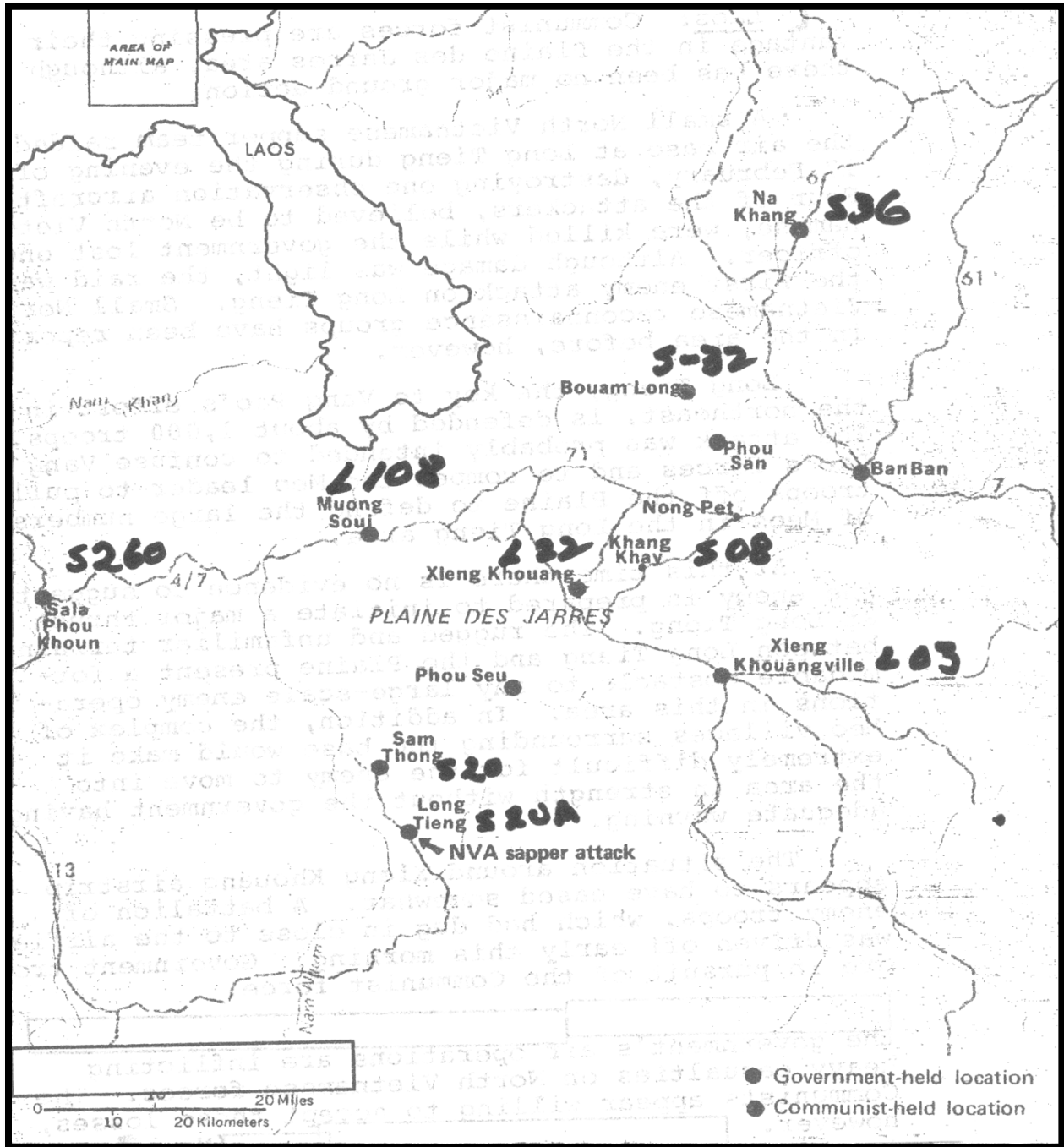
Mike shrugged and answered, *"Don't you want to shut down and check the machine for damage?"*

At that point, Scratch relinquished the controls saying, *"I don't believe you. Now let's get out of here."* Mike complied.

When they were well away from the area, Kanach, still not aware it was only a piece of flare that hit him and not mortar or rocket shrapnel, interjected, *"You are the coolest SOB I have ever seen."*

That night, under a thick cover of fog effectively inhibiting ground or aerial surveillance and strikes, four PT-76 tanks, accompanied by substantial infantry, approached and attacked LL. The position held, and all the tanks were either disabled or destroyed by direct artillery fire or SuperMex's well placed mines.

By morning, the situation eased and the enemy battalion dug in close to the strip was discouraged from further advances. Then, after withdrawing under the effects of punishing air and artillery, government troops moved out and pursued the enemy by fire and maneuver.



CIA 02/18/70 broad area map of the Plain of Jars and the proximity of the Long Tieng-Sam Tong complex.

NOTHING IS SACROSANCT

"...they [NVA] sent a sapper squad into our main base for the first time. It wasn't too successful, but proved that it could be done..."

02/23/70 Letter Home.

Reports of enemy recon teams scoping out the Long Tieng-Sam Tong complex had been routine. On the 17th, rumors and predictions of an enemy probe on The Alternate came to fruition. At the same time that action at LL commenced, taking a leaf from Vang Pao's diversionary military book, a small Dac Cong sapper unit, estimated at seven individuals, infiltrated the Long Tieng Valley. Reaching the middle parking area along the strip, the invaders managed to damage an O-1E observation plane and two Lao T-28s before being intercepted.

Air America ground mechanic Dan Williams, assigned to The Alternate to maintain the Raven O1E planes, was shooting darts in the Customer bar on SKY hill overlooking Ralph's bear cage and the runway-parking areas in the valley below. When firing ensued, the bar lights were extinguished to enable those present to view the engagement without drawing fire. Always the aggressive fighter, unable to merely stand by without participating, Customer Wil Greene departed to join the fray. When the attack was over and Vietnamese successfully repulsed, a la Tony Poe, Black Lion returned and pinned a pair of freshly severed human ears to the dart board. ¹²

The cost of the attack was the deaths of several Vietnamese and one Meo officer. Many of Vang Pao's nighttime guards were

¹² Leary's Interview with Dan Williams. He erroneously has this attack on 01/17/70.

young children whose fathers, brothers, or other relatives had been killed by the enemy. Therefore, given the opportunity, the youngsters were often more brutal than older soldiers when dealing with enemy on their own soil. Consequently, desecration of the bodies was the norm rather than the exception.

At this time, Long Tieng was defended by an estimated 1,000 troops. The surprise attack on the valley was likely intended to display that Long Tieng was not inviolate, to stimulate turmoil among Vang Pao's people, and to encourage a withdrawal of troops from the Plain of Jars to defend the Meo homeland.

Although disconcerting, an attack was expected, but not foreseen as proceeding a major assault on the base. As an Agency bulletin stated:

"The rugged and unfamiliar terrain between Long Tieng and the Plaine present a formidable obstacle to and large-scale enemy operations in this area. In addition, the complex of Meo villages surrounding the base would make it extremely difficult for the enemy to move into the area in strength without the government having adequate warning."

ARC LIGHT B-52 STRIKE IN MR-2

Ambassador Godley first asked for USAF B-52 support in July 1969, but his request was denied. In the late fall, when it became obvious that enemy forces were massing along the eastern border of Military Region Two, in preparation for a dry season surge toward the Plain of Jars to retake and clear out Vang Pao's troops, timely B-52 strikes were proposed and requested from the highest sources, including MACV Saigon, Joint Chiefs of Staff, CIA, and Ambassador Godley. Pros and cons of the positive military and negative political aspects of employing the massive air artillery machine in northern Laos were discussed over several months by the Washington Special Action Group (WSAG),

and deferred for various reasons: too few targets, too little intelligence, and so forth. ¹³

B-52 strikes on the Plain of Jars were not politically acceptable at a time of considerable congressional introspection and public pressure regarding USG's participation in the war.

Like employing napalm to achieve tactical advantage over superior enemy numbers, first under Ambassador Unger and then William Sullivan, who was sarcastically accorded the dubious mantle of "Field Marshall" by Saigon military leaders, there was far too much discussion prior to its acceptance. Napalm was considered inhumane, but these same rear echelon individuals who were quick to judge what they considered inhumane never witnessed the merciless atrocities Pathet Lao and Vietnamese

¹³ The January 1970 WSAG group included President Nixon's Assistant for National Security Affairs, Henry Kissinger, and representatives from the Department of State, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the National Security Council.

soldiers perpetrated on Meo civilians. ¹⁴

Villagers, spies, road watch teams, and visual air reconnaissance accurately reported enemy build-ups along Route-7. Instead of salvoing bombs to churn up white dirt, create more buffalo wallows, and stumps where jungle formerly prevailed along the Trails, timely B-52 strikes on enemy concentrations in the Ban Ban Valley and along LOCs in the third week in January might have drastically impeded the enemy timetable to invest the Plain of Jars, or even influenced them to withdraw to North Vietnam to sulk and fight another day. As always during the Second Indochina War in Laos, too little, too late seemed to

¹⁴ Author's Comment: Throughout history, normally when all negotiation has been exhausted between antagonists, opposing nations resort to hostilities to implement what is conceived as policy critical to national security. As a world superpower constantly in the spotlight, America should never fail to win decisively or unduly prolong a conflict. The Author is no tactical mastermind, but it is clearly obvious to him that when electing to engage in war, there should be no substitute for unconditional victory. This was Marine Corps doctrine, imbued in all Marine recruits, conceived and courageously attained by actual experience. However, the concept of wars in the 1950s and 1960s tended to evolve into something entirely different, to include political considerations. Employing cause and effect to absurd proportions, politicians were much too concerned about public perception instead of victory, a step that always maximized human losses and government treasure. In conducting a war from afar, inexperienced civilian principals worried far too much about the political implications of using effective weapon systems. (Apologies to Harry Truman, who authorized the first tactical use of an atomic bomb, that in effect, hastened the end of World War Two in the Pacific.) Many times, leaders failed to appreciate battlefield requirements that would preserve both human life and inanimate objects. This was nowhere more prevalent than during the final battle for Phou Pha Thi, Laos in 1968-1969, when, instead of using largely ineffective bombs and rockets against impenetrable mountain hard points, a large propane bomb already in the inventory might have been employed to advantage. When dropped by a C-130, the heavy gas would spread and seep deep into caves, bunkers, and other underground defenses before ignition. After exploding, concussive shock effects and deprivation of oxygen would have killed or rendered enemy troops incapable of continued resistance.

characterize our politicians' methodology that led to shoulda-woulda-coulda hindsight.

On 23 January, Ambassador Godley telegraphed State, again requesting B-52 strikes on a recently-identified enemy headquarters with thousands of concentrated Vietnamese personnel (confirmed by recce on the 25th). He believed that immediate action would likely break the back of the envisioned enemy attack.

The Washington Special Action Group (WSAG) discussed the matter on the morning of 26 January. Because of a time lag in scheduling a strike and the ability of the Vietnamese to disperse, the window of opportunity was considered narrow; an immediate decision was required. The request was still opposed by State Department officials, who incredulously indicated that North Vietnamese intentions remained unclear, that the action would mark escalation, and that such strikes should be employed only after the offensive started. As usual, State won the day and the issue was deferred to the White House.

That afternoon Kissinger phoned the President recounting the WSAG meeting and the narrow time frame involved. Although Nixon thought the target was warranted, because the strike would have to be authorized through MACV Saigon, commence no later than the 27th, and Godley notified so that he could interface with the Prime Minister, he believed the target could not be hit on such short notice. Therefore, no B-52 strikes were authorized and a choice opportunity was lost.

As the situation worsened with Nong Pet, and many other forward outposts were lost or abandoned during the second week in February, the issue of B-52 strikes was reintroduced to the Washington wizards for action. Reinforcing Ambassador Godley's previous requests, even a concerned Souvanna Phouma made covert

overtures to American advisors for immediate use of the ultimate air weapon.

In a 12 February message, Godley indicated that two lucrative targets were identified. Although tactical air was doing the best possible job, unseasonable thick cloud layers on and around the Plain of Jars precluded visual recon (VR), and created inaccurate all-weather air strikes. With the ability to fly over existing weather, such conditions did not similarly affect the high-flying B-52s. Moreover, when cogent targets were identified and developed, the machines could be well employed to hit major LOCs like Route-7.

State still waffled, but on the 14th, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird informed the Secretary of State:

"It is possible that targets which are susceptible to B-52 strikes may develop in the next few days. If such targets, i.e., mass or area targets, do develop, I intend to authorize appropriate strikes."

Later that day, Laird twixed POTUS: ¹⁵

"Consideration should be given to the immediate objectives of keeping enough stability in the north Laos situation to preclude the North Vietnamese from using the situation there from becoming an available bargaining point against our [Ho Chi Minh Trail system] interdiction in southern Laos"...while the distinction between B-52s and the massive tactical air strikes is not always clear there are occasional targets which are more adaptable to B-52s."

Akin to a site too far, it had been previously agreed by Nixon that if the enemy moved beyond Moung Soui, B-52 strikes would be used. However, with the situation rapidly reaching a

¹⁵ POTUS-A modern acronym for the President of the United States.

critical mass, on the 16th, Henry Kissinger advised the President:

"Vang Pao's Meo forces on the Plain of Jars are under heavy North Vietnamese pressure and have given up most of the high ground to the east which dominates the approaches to the Plain. A number of Meo outposts have been overrun. The airfield at Xieng Khouang has been under sporadic harassing fire, but is still usable for helicopters and light aircraft. Enemy forces are well concentrated east and northeast of the Plain, but are well enough dispersed and dug in to make Tacair strikes difficult..."

With the Plain of Jars defensive front rapidly deteriorating and in danger of sliding "down the tubes," after numerous meetings on the issue and after working its way through numerous USG channels, on 17 February, a request was finally granted by the White House for a "one-time" strike on enemy forces concentrated northeast of the Plain. CINCPAC Admiral McCain was informed by Admiral Moorer to proceed with the Arc Light mission. B-52 raids in South Vietnam ceased for thirty-six hours while USAF planes were prepared to attack NVA-PL forces threatening the Plain of Jars. In order to maintain a facade of Lao neutrality, the expansion of Arc Light missions to northern Laos was first recorded on U.S. military records as routine missions over South Vietnam or Southern Laos where bombing along the Trails was an ongoing process.

During a very active night on 17/18 February, a division of high-flying B-52 crews (three planes to a division) from U-Tapao, Thailand, clandestinely unleashed a rain of silent terror on a suspected enemy headquarters and bivouac area in the hills northeast of the Plain of Jars around Tha Lin Noi (LS-18). Aircrews reported 130 huge secondary explosions. The B-52 strikes were not publicly reported until the 19th. The news

immediately stimulated another round of criticism from Congressional leaders concerned about escalation, and who had soured on President Nixon's Southeast Asian War.

TRAGIC AFTERMATH

Because the Arc Light mission marked the first B-52 strike in the Barrel Roll portion of Military Region Two, aside from battle damage assessment (BDA) and aerial photographs that showed considerable damage, Washington and the Agency were interested in the results gleaned from ground troops. Principals demanded statistics on numbers of enemy dead, enemy still left in the area, and items of intelligence value. A flash message was directed to the U.S. Embassy Vientiane, where officials passed the request to the Agency headquarters radio room located on Sky Hill at Long Tieng. After decoding, and perusal by the chief of station, the information ended up in the hands of a fairly new, overzealous Customer, who began assembling a Meo unit to insert and assess the nature and extent of damage inflicted on the enemy force. The size of the Special Mission and perceived danger warranted assembling four H-34s with double crews, and coordinating an armed escort.

Captain John Ford and John Christian Merkel were flying Hotel-67 conducting normal missions when called by the Customer to participate in what was considered a hastily arranged mission. Ford had been monitoring Merkel, a recent Saigon transferee, just prior to his H-34 Captain upgrade. During the briefing Ford decided he would let Merkel continue flying in the right seat as his performance during the day had been excellent. ACP Jerry McEntee, senior man in the group, would lead the flight and be the first to land. Ford and Merkel were number three in the group.

It was late afternoon when thirty troops boarded three H-34s. The PICs of the three loaded H-34 crews launched with one SAR ship to join up with their A-1E escort on the southern edge of the Plain of Jars. Then they all proceeded in trail formation toward the projected landing zone. Vang Pao's T-28 pilots were marking the area with white phosphorous rockets.

Since the sector was recently bombed and considered an unknown quantity, Jerry entered autorotation to maximize his descent and then reengaged the engine and transmission to land on a narrow ridgeline. The Flight Mechanic hustled the troops out and Jerry departed to the west. Number two landed and departed. Then Merkel commenced an approach. He was doing well, but since the small pad presented a challenge, Ford assisted him during the final approach to landing.

After discharging their troops and slowly climbing out, at 400 feet a projectile entered the right open cockpit window, exiting the green-house Plexiglas above Ford's head. Merkel slumped in his seat and the helicopter began gyrating wildly. John took immediate action to reestablish aircraft control, while attempting to radio in the blind not to release the A-1 cover. However, normal chit-chat prevailed and he had a difficult time making himself heard.

Merkel was dead. A single round from a "one shot Charlie" had penetrated his right jaw, entered his brain mass and continued its flight out of Hotel-67.

Meanwhile, blood dripped below, covering Flight Mechanic Joe Gaculais, who was sitting directly under the right cockpit seat. Simultaneously, the H-34 entered a seemingly uncontrollable situation. Alarmed, receiving no answer to his ICS inquiry directed at the cockpit, and unable to hear outgoing radio traffic while Ford was making his appeal for help, Joe initially believed that there was something seriously wrong with

both pilots. Gaculais, one of the more resourceful Flight Mechanics, swung out the cabin door and scrambled up the side of the helicopter toward the cockpit window. Like all Flight Mechanics who had some "stick time," I suppose he wanted to help fly if needed. By the time Joe peeked in the cockpit, Ford had wrestled the helicopter under control. With the immediate emergency over, Gaculais returned to his station in the cabin section.

Since the round emanated from the direction of the ground team, while en route to a friendly pad, Ford requested the Customer contact the men on the ground and ask if anyone had accidentally discharged a weapon. They indicated the kill shot had come from somewhere off the landing zone. This was not impossible, for we were well aware the enemy had sniper scope rifles from the 200 that were discovered in a cave during the previous year's romp on the Plain.

Members of the ground team later reported all bombs on target with numerous bunkers destroyed. However, only twenty bodies were counted, but it was assumed many more had been buried in the bunkers. Chuck Campbell told me two days after the strike that the powerful stench of decaying flesh in the target area was terrible and said the troops had not ventured far into the bombed zone.

Kanach, Jarina, and Shaffer continued to work between Long Tieng, Sam Tong and LL supporting Vang Pao's efforts to reinforce the forward headquarters and supply base. Later they performed a Special Mission to the Pha Hang (LS-205) area, twelve miles north-northeast of Houa Moung. While the McEntee group was performing the BDA mission, the crew of PFG worked LS-22 and recovered at Long Tieng at dark.

"I didn't know Merkel as he was a recent arrival from Saigon. There are a number of new people here who I don't know and probably won't until I come in contact with them. We are growing and will probably grow more as the other war subsides.

Merkel was hit by one round as they were taking off from a hot area. It was the only shot fired and as there were four helicopters involved, we chalk it up to bad luck. We lost another pilot [Gibbs] last year the same way. It is really a fluke when one round gets you."

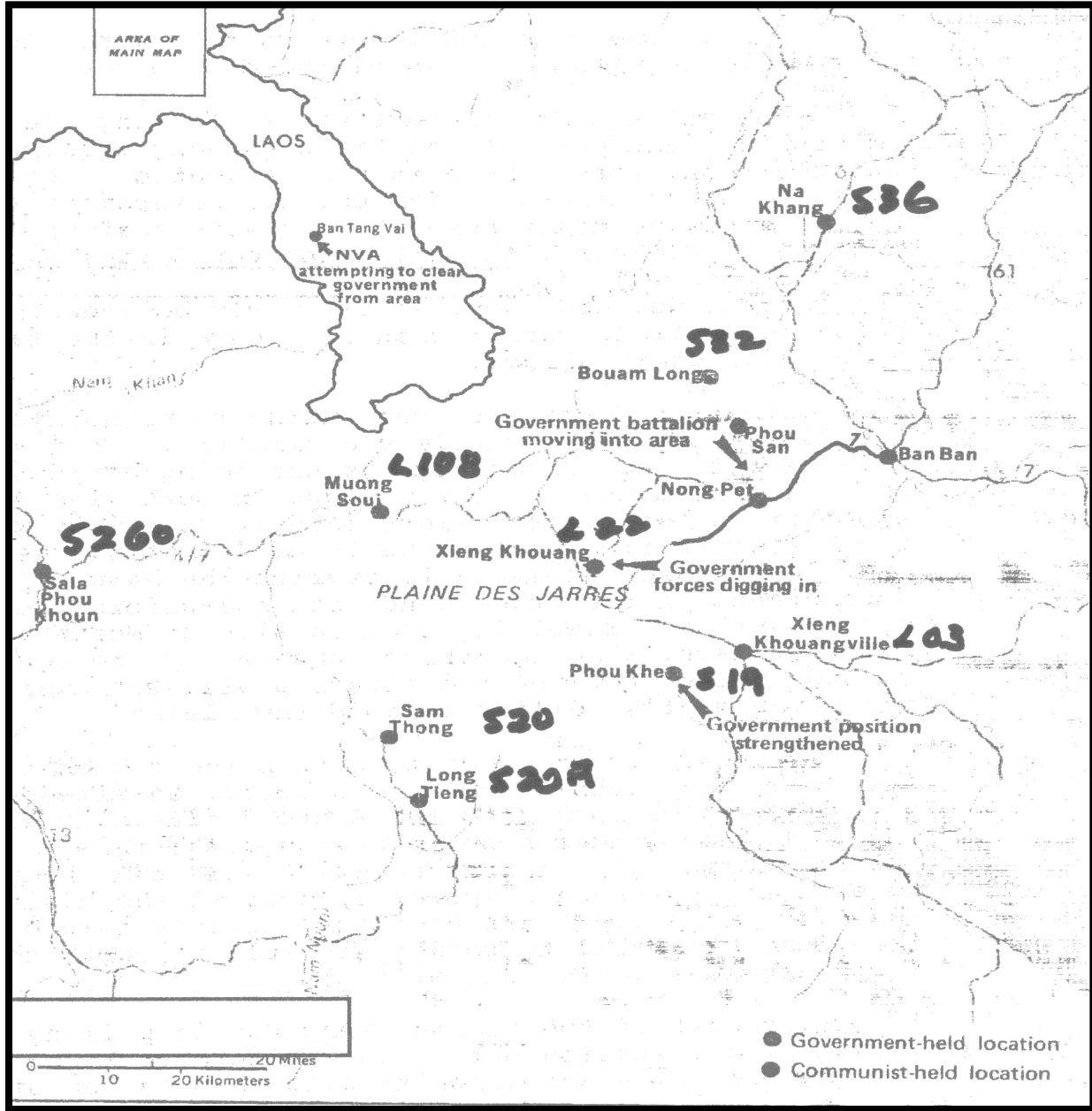
03/12/70 Letter Home.

Udorn management was perplexed. There was an abundance of confusion over the incident since one could not be certain of the bullet's origin. CPH Wayne Knight was very skeptical of the friendly fire theory. There was no evidence of this and it seemed unlikely to investigators at the time because the troops were too busy keeping their heads down after departing the aircraft.

There was no on-site investigation because the enemy continued to control the terrain. Therefore, the investigation consisted primarily of individual testimony.

Management did not normally question reasons for helicopter missions, but this one, a first to assess BDA, seemed unduly ill conceived. Consequently, the incident resulted in several hot exchanges with higher-up AB-1 types.

The incident left a bad taste in my mouth. I was similarly interested to know why H-34s were employed for such a mission more suited for Bells. It was likely because of a lack of Hueys available, or other missions in which the crews were involved. I



02/19/70 CIA map depicting government efforts to reinforce and hold positions in and around the Plain of Jars.

never discovered the reason. The Customer's reputation, already pegged by many as highly abrasive, suffered among our crews. He did not seem to care, and continued to alienate pilots. Despite our loss, the Arc Light mission achieved some positive results. Chuck Campbell later told me that estimated KIAs were high from the abattoir-like odor of decaying human flesh pervading the area.

I wondered about Ford's mental state, for he represented the only pilot I knew who had two men die in the helicopter he was piloting: first Chris Crisologo, now Merkel. The two nasty events must have been very traumatic and a difficult issue for John to resolve.

CPH Knight, not involved in Jon Merkel's initial acceptance check or his training, did not know the pilot personally, but noted that his affairs were arranged in excellent order. On top of his personal papers was found an undated 10,000-dollar check endorsed to his wife. There was also a paper describing how to access all accounts and insurance policies.

Merkel's remains were delivered to the U.S. Kay Merkel, who had previously taught school in South Vietnam, returned to Fort Worth, Texas, where she pursued her teaching career.

Of course, information relating to the first B-52 strikes in Military Region Two, and especially the American death, could not be suppressed long. Therefore, to pacify their constituents, Democratic Senators, Symington, Mansfield, Mathias, Gore, Cooper, and Percy demanded full public release of the Lao hearing transcripts. This was done in April.

After another sizable enemy assault on Lima Lima was repulsed, Vang Pao, determined to make every effort to hold the complex, pumped additional soldiers into the site. This continued until an estimated 2,000 men were emplaced in defensive positions.

Despite the successful B-52 strike, enemy forces continued to move onto the Plain of Jars and tighten the noose around Site-22. This resulted in most resupply missions being conducted by air drop. It appeared from the nature of attacks in the face of devastating fire that the enemy was willing to accept inordinate casualties in order to seize the base. With almost unlimited manpower arriving from North Vietnam, they could afford this tactic, unlike VP's meager and dwindling, irreplaceable forces.

The deadly chess game continued. Hoping to encourage the Vietnamese to withdraw from the confines of the Xieng Khouang base, the general planned to shift a battalion into the Nong Pet area to interdict the Route-7 LOC. Chances of achieving this initiative were considered somewhat feasible, for the enemy had not yet introduced a majority of units to the battlefield.

In the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley east of LL, efforts were underway to move government troops from more vulnerable positions and place them on the heights of the more easily defended and strategic Phou Khe (LS-19).

While implementing Vang Pao's war plans, the crew of PFG worked between Long Tieng, Xieng Khouang Ville, and Lima Lima. During the day, they also participated in four Special Missions in the San Tiau (LS-02) area.

Deadheading on Hotel-54, Jarina left for Udorn. ¹⁶

ADDITIONAL AIRCRAFT

Temporarily augmenting our waning Bell fleet for the Plain of Jars operation--this is what we initially thought--14F and 35F were slated to be ferried to Udorn from Saigon by volunteer crew members that included Bell pilots Ted Helmers, Charlie

¹⁶ Segment Sources:

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 252-253, fn 35, 260.

Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 334-335.

Victor Anthony, *The War In Northern Laos*, 325-326.

John Pratt, *Vietnam Voices, Perspective on the War Years 1941-1975* (Athens: Georgia Press, 1984) 422-423.

U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, Volume 6, Vietnam, January 1969-July 1970, Document 172, 01/26/70, Minutes of Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, Laos.

FRUS, Document 173, 01/26/70, Transcript of Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and his Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger).

FRUS, Document 181, 02/12/70, Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Current Hanoi Intentions in Laos.

FRUS, Document 183, Memorandum from the President's assistant for national security affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, B-52s in Laos, undated.

FRUS, Document 184, 02/16/70, Memorandum from the President's assistant for national security affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Talking points for your meeting on Laos.

CIA 02/13/70 Bulletin, The communists have launched a major counteroffensive against government forces in the Plaine des Jarres.

CIA 02/16/70 Bulletin, Communist forces are closing in on the government's main base on the Plaine des Jarres.

02/18/70 CIA Bulletin, Communist forces are pressing their advantage in the Plaine des Jarres area, although there has been no major ground action.

John Bowman ed., *The World Almanac of the Vietnam War* (New York: Bison Book, 1985) 250.

William Leary February 1970 Notes with Interviews from Principals Jerry McEntee and John Ford about Jon Merkel's death.

William Leary 01/17/70 Notes, End of Tour Report by USAF Colonel Edward Kenny. Knight Emails, 10/22/70, 10/23/00, 10/24/00.

Joe Leeker, *The Aircraft of Air America*, Hotel-67.

Mike Jarina Interviews.

02/19/70 CIA Intelligence Bulletin, The government appears determined to defend its main base on the Plaine des Jarres.

John Prados.

Basham, Ben Densley, and Flight Mechanic Bob Noble. Chief Pilot Bob Hitchman would lead the flight. During the early days of the Madriver Operation, Hitchman had flown H-34s from Udorn to Saigon for heavy maintenance (IRAN) when the Udorn Air America Maintenance Department was not yet equipped with personnel or tools to perform the job. Later, when Udorn was operational for any kind of maintenance, to include aircraft re-builds, he ferried Bell ships to that facility.

NOBLE

During mid-February, Captain Bob Hitchman alerted Bob Noble that he would be crewing 35F to Udorn for a mission along with 14F. When Noble asked a lot of questions that Hitch could or would not answer, Bob used his own judgment as to what he should take for the trip.

On 19 February the crews loaded the two ships on the Air America ramp, cranked up, and prepared to launch, when the control tower operator told the men to air taxi to the immigration and passport section. Nobel's ship had a few machine guns and other equipment onboard, so, in order to avoid problems with the authorities, he quickly removed the left side transmission cowling and placed all the questionable equipment on the deck. Then the aircraft were re-started and the PICs hovered to the control tower. When no one emerged from the building to inspect the helicopters or to check personnel credentials, they departed.

They landed first at one of the work sites and retrieved all of the protection gear from the transmission area. Then they refueled at another site near the Cambodian border.

The two-aircraft flight continued at 12,000 feet and ninety knots over the border Trails. During the hazardous trip, the trail ship encountered 23mm AAA fire without sustaining battle

damage. There was not much the crews could do except endure the fire, until passing out of the critical area.

Then Noble realized he had an alternative. He was carrying a pair of his good friend, Captain Jon Merkel's old jump boots, which he had previously requested. Before leaving Saigon he had been informed that Jon had recently been killed on a mission. Since Merkel had no further need of the footwear, Bob opened the cabin door and threw out the two boots, hoping to hit one of the AAA gunners.

The arrival in Udorn marked a first for Noble. The crews were greeted by management and driven to the Charoen Hotel for the night. With the exception of Hitchman, Saigon crews were to remain for two weeks.

On the 20th, Ted Helmers, Bob Noble, and I departed Udorn for Long Tieng in Bell 204B 35F. We continued to support LL. As the day unfolded, we received our ration of combat flying. By the end of the day, I wondered if Ted wished that he was back in Saigon, flying in a more benign, low level, and strip-to-strip environment. Noble recalled:

"This type of flying support was not common in Saigon; only when I participated in the Phoenix Project work." ¹⁷

Noble was quite a character, with a strong, aggressive, talkative, outgoing personality. He talked about crewing black painted H-34s along the border at night. I had never heard this story before, and wondered if he had worked for MACVSOG (Studies and Observations Group), or had Agency connections.

Nobs wore a belt buckle that doubled as a small fist knife when detached. He offered to obtain one for me, but I was not a hand-to-hand combat type, preferring my standoff AK-47 rifle.

¹⁷ Bob Noble Email, 05/11/15. Bob explained his part in the aircraft transfer to Udorn.

Knight worked with Noble a lot, heard the stories, and concluded that he had a propensity to exaggerate events. He doubted the claim of black H-34s, and also thought Noble was not the strongest Bell mechanic in the organization.

After Jarina was released as Captain in the Bell, Mike flew with Noble. Bob, a New Yorker, asked Mike if he wanted a silencer from people who manufactured them in the city.

A little later, they were flying in the LS-72 valley into Sam Tong when Bob said, *"Mike, would you pull up for a minute? There's a bomb crater over there and a skull bleaching in the sun."*

"What?"

"Yeah, there are ants up there." Noble wanted to take the skull home after the ants and worms completed cleaning the bones.

..."They got the H-34 out [of LL] only to have another engine quit...and it is still there, this time for good. I guess it wanted to die there.

Well, we kept going into the area and I was mortared once, but it was short and was no problem."

02/23/70 Letter Home.

Hotel-75, the H-34 that had an engine malfunction on the 15th at Lima Lima, had been repaired. However, while Ted Cash and Joe Lopes performed the obligatory engine run-in, and were airborne flight-testing the machine around the lower portion of the strip, another engine malfunction prompted Ted to autorotate to the deck. Sufficient metal particles were discovered in the engine sump plug and engine oil screen to warrant grounding the machine again.

Since the site was under sporadic enemy attack, the ship was abandoned and the crew evacuated to The Alternate.

We continued shuttling into the base. Later in the day a mortar round splashed in the area. Like previous launches, indirect projectiles fired from the fixed tube were still inaccurate, probably designed to inform us that the enemy crew was alive, well, and still active.

THE LOSS OF LIMA LIMA

The final attacks on Lima Lima commenced with a late afternoon rocket barrage, followed by a late evening infantry assault from the northern sector. As before, devastating ground fire from Neutralist defenders, supplemented by airborne gunship fire, stopped the attack at the fence. After reorganizing, early in the gloom and cold of dark-thirty morning hours on the high plateau, when AC-47 gunships departed the area to rearm and refuel, the Vietnamese resumed the attack. This time, supported by PT-76 tanks, enemy infantry units broke through the northern wire perimeter. Fearful of tanks, FAN warriors' previous resolve faded. The panicked troops fled south through SGU lines at high port. Influenced by the unexpected FAN retreat, hundreds of remaining defenders departed their foxholes and bunkers, following the columns southwest toward the Ban Thang (LS-275) fallback base. Government losses were low, and by early afternoon on the 21st Site-22 was virtually empty of FAN, FAR, and Meo troops. Thereafter, efforts commenced to destroy the tools of war left behind. Except for isolated heroism, the final battle had been an unimpressive last-ditch effort by a seemingly well defended force that included numbers superior to the enemy.

With this last sizeable bastion on the Plain of Jars abandoned, former barriers to the Plain were completely open to enemy incursion along established LOCs. Probes soon began at

other less strongly defended positions at defensive high points on Phou Keng and Phou Khout (Kout).

An Agency summary loosely described the current situation:

"A series of rapid attacks has enabled the commies to reoccupy virtually all of the ground lost in north Laos during the RLG's last rainy season offensive.

Commie control over the PDJ was assured when an estimated 400 NVA, supported by tanks, finally overran the government's forward headquarters at Xieng Khouang airfield in the early AM of 21 February. Government defenders apparently suffered only light losses in their retreat west and south from the airfield and most of them have found their way back to friendly lines. By the evening of 21 February, after the evacuation of [Lima-22] the entire PDJ was [nearly] in Commie hands."

CINCPAC, Admiral John McCain made a statement in Saigon that the *"present deteriorating situation in Laos is of serious concern to us..."*

In Washington, Secretary of State Rogers conferred with Thai Prime Minister Thanat Khoman, assuring him that the USG intended to fulfill its pledges to Thailand if the border was threatened.¹⁸

¹⁸ Doug Dreifus, Director of Safety, Air America Aircraft Accident Review of Hotel-75, Air America XOXO 06/17/70.

Ken Conboy, 253.

John Pratt *CHECO*, 113-114.

Author Phone Call to Ben Densley, 04/20/13.

Wayne Knight Email, 10/24/00.

Mike Jarina Interviews.

Agency Weekly Summary, Communists restore their control in north Laos, 6, 02/27/70.

Foreign Relations.

THE DIEN BIEN PHU RAID

When national interests warranted, America became a principal in the Second Indochina War. Activity at the historic Dien Bien Phu complex, located well north of the Lao Royal Capital at Luang Prabang, became a point of interest to U.S. military and Agency types. The area had become a sizeable supply depot and rear echelon headquarters of the 316 Division for the northwestern military region. Over the years, either because of enemy spies mixed in the Lao population, or extraordinary monitoring of the border region, all previous attempts to infiltrate intelligence teams by parachute into the area had failed dismally.

After advanced helicopters were introduced to Laos in the early 1960s, the new medium of mobility lent an increased sophistication to deliver teams clandestinely and more safely to remote regions where they could walk to their targets. When Phong Saly Province was all but officially annexed by China, road work activity on Route-19 increased from Dien Bien Phu toward Moung Khoua, Laos, and FAR was obtaining gains north of Luang Prabang, the Agency's renewed interest revitalized attempts to insert both recon and action teams on the outskirts of Dien Bien Phu.

At the Customer's behest, Air America and USAF helicopter crews had been delivering mixed ethnic intelligence teams to remote sites near the Military Region One border of North Vietnam. Despite the apparent remoteness of the region, the enemy always seemed to know who was lurking in their backyard. Whether it was the wrong uniform or insignia, special recognition signals, carelessness, or similar warnings, there was always something unique like an identifying mark or code to trigger and alert enemy patrols to an unauthorized presence, and few team members ever returned from these missions.

As the drawdown of the U.S presence in South Vietnam was about to commence in mid-1969, requests were made by the Nixon Administration for the Agency to create tangible diversions by recommending in Washington speak, *"high political and psychological impact actions against military targets in North Vietnam."* One plan included a ground-based raid on enemy barracks, storage facilities, and other buildings in the Dien Bien Phu Valley. Probably because of past failures to conduct surveillance or actually enter the valley, the plan was not popular with State, Defense, and upper echelon Agency types. Still, the President and his men authorized further investigation and research into such operations.

By December, a request from Washington again surfaced to strike worthwhile targets within the Democratic Vietnamese Republic (DVR). With Vang Pao's Plain of Jars endeavor in jeopardy, chief of station Vientiane Larry Devlin believed that it was not a propitious time to mount small raids that would produce little impact on the overall war. Nevertheless, administration officials were not dissuaded and continued to push for action in early 1970. The word of the administration was law. Therefore, planning for a Dien Bien Phu mission went forward and was slated for 22 February.

COMMANDO RAIDERS

Success of such an ambitious undertaking required sufficient training and tough, elite troops for the operation. To implement the raid, a highly trained and motivated action team, now known as Commando Raiders instead of SGU, was selected. The Raiders were a separate force. Instead of being trained by military region Case Officers, they were controlled

outside normal channels by special operatives for Commando Raider missions.¹⁹

Military Region Three candidates for the Commando Raider program were selected from the ranks of SGU units. All were Lao who grew up in the hills, except for a few Phou Tai types, not noticeable to the average eye.

Don Courtney was still working the Military Region Two desk at AB-1 when the first raider class was graduated. As a perk, he ordered a handmade Ruana Bowie knife for the leading man from each military region. He later learned that Savannakhet deputy Bill Miller kept one knife for himself, commenting, *"This knife is too nice to give to a Lao."*

Toward the end of 1969, after completing Special Forces training at Pitts Camp, located in the jungle outside of Phitsanulok in western Thailand, the unit was delivered to Pha Khao, well away from prying eyes. Crew-served weapons training continued under the auspices of Burr Smith (Mister Clean) and others until on mid-February, when their Case Officer was alerted to the impending mission. At that time, all efforts were stepped up toward that end.

I did not fly for several reasons on the 21st. Plain of Jars defenses were rapidly falling to the enemy and a clear estimate of the battlefield situation was not yet well established. Moreover, while Allied bombers saturated areas to exact a sharp toll on the enemy and permit our troops to withdraw south, it was considered too dangerous to conduct helicopter flight operations. The second reason involved the process of assembling seven airworthy Bells and crews at The

¹⁹ Unaware of any difference in teams, the term Commando Raider was not used by Air America crews at this time or rarely in the future.

Alternate for the Dien Bien Phu operation. A third reason was the requirement for a thorough pilot-in-charge (PIC) mission briefing. A fourth was likely that even though we had one spare Bell, no flights were authorized against the possibility of one or more being grounded for maintenance or battle damage.

During the day, crews and aircraft began arriving at the base. Wayne Knight ferried Papa Foxtrot Juliet to Alternate with Mike Jarina deadheading with him. Others arrived. Perhaps for the first time, it was truly amazing to observe the number of Bells. and crews to man them, in one place.

CHARLIE G.

The briefing for the super-secret mission was conducted by swarthy, blue-eyed Charlie Gabler, who represented special air operations for the CIA in Laos, and coordinated sensitive air operations elsewhere in Southeast Asia, including the recovery of American prisoners of war and dropping supplies to local troops. His work caused him to interface with Air America, CASI, and indigenous airlines.

Gabler, a Harvard University graduate, had participated in World War Two, flying U.S. Navy amphibious planes in the Pacific. He was shot down and survived four days before being rescued.

Charlie joined the CIA in 1953 and was posted to Taiwan. He also served in South America and Florida during the Cuban Missile crisis and Bay of Pigs fiasco. He was assigned to Laos in the late sixties.

I could not recall meeting the tall, brash man before, but Wayne Knight had, and did not particularly care for his overly aggressive nature.

Wayne had previously attended a number of meetings in Vientiane that "Sir Charlie" chaired. The attendees, all

probably "witting," varied, depending on the topic of discussion. ²⁰ Bill Leonard, who worked under the auspices of USAID, was often present. Air America Operations Manager Tom Krohn, fixed wing Manager of Flight at Udorn Jim Rhyne, and a number of Agency Air Operations Officers were in attendance at various meetings. Chief Pilot Ed Dearborn from CASI also attended.

Gabler was the first person in authority who Knight heard discuss the "Big Sky" policy regarding flight control over Laos.

During one of the meetings, following a near miss between two fixed wing planes, the issue of a positive flight control system was raised by people who fervently believed this issue was important. Charlie explained all the difficulties involved in implementing such a system. At the time, they would have been practically insurmountable given the poor state of the Lao aviation industry and the prevailing situation. Charlie revealed that there had been considerable thought afforded the matter, but because of the significant problems, it had been decided to continue allowing the "Big Sky" principle to rule. It was a big sky over Laos, and traffic was relatively light, so it was unlikely that there would be a mid-air collision. In addition, we had our own air-to-air-to-ground facilities, which served us reasonably well.

As much as Wayne wanted to disagree with Gabler, there was no other solution to formulate a case for an air traffic control

²⁰ Witting: Vetted by the Agency to receive classified information.

system.²¹

Without divulging targets, or the goal of the Special Mission, or belaboring minutia, like a clown prince, Gabler seemed unduly hyperactive, continuously walking about the room waving his arms, and authoritatively stressing a requirement for secrecy. The mission was so highly compartmentalized that few people were cognizant of it. Overall, he reminded me of a cheerleader at a football game.

I was more than a little amused at Charlie's antics. Whether the pasty-faced individual was aware or not, we had performed many similar missions in the past without enduring an extensive briefing. How could this undertaking be so different? Granted, I could not recall an insertion so close to the border (at coordinates TJ 8062), but the drop-off point was still considered in the remote hills of Laos.

Charlie droned on and on about this and that. Some items were new; others were not. Observing radio silence was standard procedure, but not standard was the removal of identification friend or foe (IFF) transponders from all aircraft to prevent inadvertent emissions of energy that might be intercepted by enemy radar. At a predetermined location, flight levels would have to be very low to attain what was considered sufficient

²¹Reasoning the odds of two aircraft colliding infinitesimal, the "Big Sky" philosophy prevailed during the early years of British aviation. However, this all changed when there was an actual mid-air collision. The issue smacked of the stop sign or stop light being installed after the fact—mainly a death.

Such a control system never would have worked in a remote and backward country containing poor and so few working navigation facilities. Moreover, the enemy probably was aware of most of what we were doing in Laos and any ATC system would only have provided more lucrative targets and greatly enhanced their intelligence capability.

The fixed wing reporting points at Ritaville Ridge, Checkpoint Peter, Twin Peaks, Sop Kao, Kaiser's Hat, and other widely familiar and easily identified checkpoints were helpful during the smoky season and other adverse weather conditions.



Looking south-southwest down the Long Tieng parking-loading ramp against a backdrop of forested karsts and foggy hills, a mix of seven 205D/204B Air America Bells are gathered to conduct the 22 February 1970 special SGU mission raid on Dien Bien Phu, North Vietnam.

Wayne Knight Collection.

ground clutter to confuse radar operators. Because of the significant roundtrip distance and time involved and circumnavigation required, we would fuel at Nam Hang (LS-278) on the way in and out of the target area.

Toward the end of the Gabler briefing, to my knowledge for the first time in Special Mission history, Charlie and his cohorts distributed secrecy forms requiring all helicopter crewmembers' signatures. This was a highly unusual request. In addition, we were informed that all means of crewmember identification would be collected prior to the actual launch. I suppose this was SOP for this kind of black mission, established to continue the Agency's penchant for plausible deniability should any one of us fail to return from the mission. Perish that thought, for the spin regarding our participation in the Second Indochina War was that we were mercenary types. Although no intelligent person who knew anything about the situation in Laos could accept this explanation, it was a pretense employed and perpetuated at the time to explain our presence in the country. Although we wore Company-mandated distinctive clothing, without wanted dead or alive posters common in the old wild west, we reputedly had sizeable rewards placed on our heads, and would certainly be classified as spies by the enemy, and subject to termination if captured. Moreover, as civilians, Geneva Convention rules did not apply to us. Although, as in the case of Ernie Brace,²² rescue attempts might be undertaken, we would certainly be denied by USG and associated agencies. These items were never mentioned or explained to us at initial hiring in Washington, the processing and interviews in Taipei, by Udorn management, or were contained in the employment contract, or the

²² See Author's 1965 book.

²² There was a portion in the Personnel Manual allocated to incarceration and continued employee wages.

Company Personnel Manual. Still, the common sense, but distasteful issue was a given, and we always had to live with such threats to perform our jobs. ²³ The issue sometimes led to bravado in the Club bar, where individuals boasted that if forced down and surrounded by bad guys, they would not be taken alive and would save the last round for themselves. This thinking was untested until Frenchy Smith was shot down and, nearly out of ammunition, briefly considered the issue-albeit very briefly.

Almost as an afterthought, and likely to ameliorate the negativity generated by the briefing information, Gabler indicated that each crewmember would be paid 500 dollars for the insertion and a similar amount for the exfil. ²⁴ The amount was impressive, ten times the sum we received for conducting "normal" road watch Special Missions. These puzzling differences gave me pause to reconsider and reflect on the potential risks involved in the mission. Moreover, we had never relinquished IDs before, or been paid such an enormous sum for conducting missions. That in itself was scary. What exactly was this man not telling us? It was suspicious indeed. Just how hazardous was the mission? Did Charlie expect us to encounter abundant AAA fire, enemy aircraft, or ground patrols at the landing site? Perhaps I was attempting to make something out of nothing, but I left the meeting quite confused and conflicted.

The large amount of money projected for each individual on the mission triggered neurons in my brain that somewhat explained who we were and who we represented. After years of suspicion and innuendo that we were actually CIA, the obviously

²⁴ At the time I was not aware that 500 dollars was standard Agency payment for most "Black" missions.

"black ops" mission finally served to move this conundrum closer to reality and finally settle things in my mind. I postulated that as bona fide civilians performing jobs the U.S. military were forbidden, or could not under the 1962 Geneva Accord's protocols, we were actually Agency-sponsored individuals intertwined with and employed to implement USG policy and agendas in Laos. No longer were our organizations separate entities. The illusion of mutual exclusion was all a glorious facade. Moreover, overlapping facets blurred. USAID, USIS, RO, and 713 were all part of USG's grand plan, one tasked to cooperate, and calculated to save Laos, enhance our forces in South Vietnam, and delay the North's ability to exercise hegemony over Indochina.

That night, with the hostel overflowing, extra cots were erected in the hall. With demons of war churning in my mind, I attempted to retire, wondering what awaited us on this highly touted extra Special Mission the following day. Because of the unknown quantities at a landing site, insertions always posed the worst potential, for you never knew what awaited you on the ground. Current photo recon of the proposed landing site was fine for initial planning, but would not be current upon arrival and we would not enjoy the luxury of a lead plane to assess the weather and ground situation. And this night there was also consternation regarding enemy forces surging across the Plain, and not content with re-conquering that territory, attacking, capturing, and denying us use of our two forward bases at Sam Tong and Long Tieng.

THE FIRST MISSION

Phase one of the mission proved melodramatic. Although stressful until the insertion, our fears were unfounded and the mission was successful.

The total distance direct to the drop point and return was estimated at 300 nautical miles. However, additional mileage was anticipated necessary for circumnavigation of radar-covered areas and dog legs calculated to remain in Lao territory and avoid overflying North Vietnamese airspace. Therefore, we planned an all-day operation to allow for loading, forming the loose flight, fueling, and the actual flight into and from the landing zone. The long distance, certain to require at least five hours flight time, necessitated prepositioning fuel midway at Nam Hang (LS-278). Site-278 was located six miles south of Houei Tong Ko and a bit east of the towering mountain at Point Alpha, where Ernie Kuhn had marshaled refugees after the fall of the Site-85 area in 1968. It was one of the few secure sites still held by our people. Since all our Bells were not equal in speed, performance, and fuel burn, like the slowest ship in a World War Two maritime convoy, this would dictate our en route progress to the target area.

Following an abbreviated last-minute briefing, collection of crewmember wallets, and other identifying articles by participating Customers such as Chuck Campbell, we cranked up and launched east for Pha Khao to retrieve our charges. Phil Goddard and Nikki Fillipi, renowned for his expertise with stopwatches, navigation abilities, and brand of banter, led the flight. Other pilots involved in the mission were Ed Reid and Ken Wood crewing Papa Foxtrot Hotel; Frenchy Smith; Wayne Knight; Ben Densley; Scratch Kanach, Flight Mechanic Bennie Shaffer in Papa Foxtrot Juliet; Pat Colgan, Robbie Robertson, Mike Jarina, and Terry Dunn flying 14-Foxtrot; the Author, Don Leach, and Flight Mechanic Bob Noble in 35-Foxtrot. Pilots JJ McCauley and Jack Knotts may also have participated in this

first mission. ²⁵ For security reasons, the Customer mandated that identical crews were to be used for the yet unannounced time for the team extraction.

We lined up nose to tail along the runway at Site-14 to expedite loading and to conserve fuel. Five or six heavily laden men "loaded for bear", each dressed in Vietnamese Army attire, carrying Soviet AK-47 assault rifles, plus substantial ammunition, explosive devices, and enough supplies to last a few days, boarded six ships.

From the cabin section of 35F my Flight Mechanic Bob Noble recalled:

"I was shocked to see North Vietnamese troops lined up to get on our helicopters. The uniforms and equipment were exactly what I had seen on dead NVA in South Vietnam.

The troops loaded a funny-looking V-shaped ramp with thin iron legs and several 2.75 rockets with heads installed.

I tried to be very observant without showing it. I did notice that we carried one of the commanders of the mission. His mission equipment was much different than the other four members of his team. One of the commander's equipment pouches intrigued me. I asked in sign language if I could see inside. He showed me a pair of Nikon binoculars with a 1/2 frame 16mm camera mounted on the right lens." ²⁶

Chuck Campbell and other Customers, equipped with appropriate radios to contact our cover aircraft and coordinate fueling at Site-278 went on 14F, the SAR bird. A few troops carried special rocket launchers I had never previously seen (somewhat like the LAWs anti-tank weapon). As a safety factor,

²⁵ My apologies to pilots and other participating crewmembers not acknowledged.

²⁶ Bob Noble Email, 05/11/15. Bob's comments regarding the Dien Bien Phu mission.

like fuses for activating explosives, rockets and batteries were separated and apportioned to separate ships. Light mortars might have been carried by three-man teams, but I did not carry one.

Although mission goals and objectives had not been disclosed, it was obvious from the weaponry carried that this unit was an aggressive action team intent on inflicting maximum harm to something or someone. At this juncture, one could only speculate what that was.

I had previously asked Chuck what the mission entailed. However, for the first time since I knew the man, obviously embarrassed, he was reluctant and noncommittal regarding my question, intimating the mission had top secret classification and was compartmentalized on a strict need to know basis. As someone who liked to know as much as possible regarding a mission for contingency planning against all eventualities, I accepted Chuck's words, but was not happy with them.

After a final radio check to ascertain that all aircraft were loaded and ready, Phil launched. We proceeded in a lazy trail formation, skirting the Plain of Jars to the west of Phu So, and in a northerly direction west of Phu Cum and twenty-seven miles beyond to Nam Hang. It was the first time, other than in the Army, that Bob Noble had seen so many helicopters flying in formation.

Upon landing at the 800-foot north-south oriented strip and taking appropriate interval on each other, we secured, wolfed down our ham and cheese sandwiches, and waited for the word to launch. While supervised fueling was underway, at the appropriate time, Campbell attempted to contact our Skyraider escort en route from Nakhon Phanom.

With all participants considered ready, we cranked up, launched northwest, and joined with our escort pilots. In addition, MiGCAP was provided. Flight was conducted at

relatively low altitudes over rarely travelled remote terrain. Perhaps some of the extra mission pay was granted for flying at this unaccustomed altitude below that normally flown to avoid small arms fire. To avoid detection, we detoured to remain well east of the Nam Ou, a nature-provided LOC where resupply by water continued at night to western enemy locations north of Luang Prabang. After conducting heading changes to avoid some weather, but yet still overflying check points we passed over a remote section of Route-19 without attracting enemy fire. Then we dropped down to treetop level and continued north, paying attention to avoid the dog's head bulge, a small portion of the common border that jutted more than six miles into Laos.

Noble recalled that the final leg to the landing zone was "suspenseful."

Phil and Nikki, as stated noteworthy for his navigation skills, did a masterful job of leading us to the drop point. The landing zone was located on the finger of a ridgeline almost on the border and six miles west of the Dien Bien Phu Valley. Keeping our eyes open for indications of enemy presence in the area while attempting to avoid a collision with another Bell, we loitered and orbited low between ridges effectively masking us from the target valley and potential border watchers, as Goddard prepared for his approach to land and assess the terrain for multiple landings. As usual, the elephant grass was quite high, necessitating a momentary hover for the first crews to land to avoid ever-present hidden tree stumps and boulders. We were in this area for twenty minutes or more while all our ships landed in turn at safe intervals and hastily dislodged their warriors. We had A-1E cover right to the touchdown point, something a few pilots considered might compromise the mission.

My Flight Mechanic Noble was hopeful that he might catch a glimpse of the historic Dien Bien Phu Valley, but intent on masking our presence from the enemy, we were too low.

With fifty percent of the mission complete, we reformed in loose trail and reversed course, bypassing all former detours, but continuing at low level below radar coverage toward Nam Hang. Goddard released the A-1 pilots early to accomplish a secondary fragged mission. By the time I landed at Long Tieng I had logged two hours in the denied area, considerably more flight time than any other Special Mission. Perhaps Charlie was getting his money's worth from our services after all.

Since I had accumulated over a hundred hours for the month, and my participation in the mission was complete, operations recalled me. Consequently, I left 35F with Don and Nobs, and deadheaded to the Udorn Company facility on a C-123. There, I waited at home to be called for phase two--the undetermined extraction of the Dien Bien Phu team.

PDJ

After the Lima Lima garrison fled the immediate battlefield or capitulated, with all will and fortitude of government forces to further resist enemy aggression gone, Vietnamese forces were on a roll moving south close behind the scattered and disorganized troops. After loosely regrouping, with the help of Vang Pao's officers, a hasty and tentative head count was taken that revealed only about half the number of LL defenders. Other unknown numbers of troops were deemed moving along trails in the mountains surrounding the Plain. Not physically or mentally equipped to ward off an enemy advance, the Ban Thang marshalling point was soon abandoned. The loss of the elevated defensive positions on Phou Keng and Phou Khout followed; there was nothing left to fend off enemy movement toward Moung Soui and

Long Tieng. Unfortunately, the original plan to initiate a slow and orderly troop withdrawal from the Plain of Jars so air power could destroy vast numbers of the enemy never materialized.

"Major General Vang Pao's efforts to establish a new defensive perimeter have been complicated by additional westward advances by the enemy. The Commies, pursuing their advantage quickly seized the mountain outpost of Phou Khout on 23 February."

On the day of our Dien Bien Phu lift, Vang Pao, finally realizing that he could no longer counter superior enemy numbers with battle fatigued troops, or air assets subject to weather-related restrictions from fog, haze, and smoke, elected to officially sanction abandoning Xieng Khouang Ville, something already underway. The site had increasingly been subjected to enemy fire. I watched one afternoon as Captain Ray Jefferies' Caribou was mortared while loading on the L-03 strip. Troops faded into the hills south of the valley reaching Phou Khe and moving further west to Khang Kho to establish a new defensive line to protect the Long Tieng complex. ²⁷

²⁷Segment Sources:

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 243-244, 253.

Thomas Ahern, *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos 1961-1973* (Washington: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2006) 349-350.

Don Courtney Military Region Three Case Officer Emails, 08/03/02, 08/31/02, 09/11/02.

Knight Emails, 10/23/00, 10/24/00, 10/27/00, 10/29/00, 10/30/00, 11/01/00 (2).

Don Leach Interview.

Ben Densley Phone Call.

McAllen Thompson Email, Charles Gabler Obit, 06/21/98.

Agency Weekly Summary, 02/27/70.

Mike Jarina Interviews.

UDORN

While relaxing at our Benjarn Road home, I composed a letter to the folks at home related to the action on the Plain of Jars, the loss of Site-22, and the crew concern while staying overnight at the Long Tieng and Sam Tong hostels:

"This has been a busy month and I have been on the go more than usual. We have lost the PDJ as of three days ago, mostly a voluntary withdrawal under strong pressure by the NVA. Our last bastion was not unlike Dien Bien Phu in that it was surrounded by hills and presented a strong fort like affair assailable from all sides. I am glad it did not end up as poorly as the last mentioned.....I really can't say that I am unhappy that we lost that position.

There was quite a toll in enemy lives as has been the case in this whole operation. We held the PDJ for longer than anyone expected, destroyed, or captured many enemy arms, and denied them the use of thousands of people who we moved to safer areas. It was a good operation although a little hairy toward the last. One adverse result of it all is that they are very angry and may not be happy with just the PDJ. There are thousands of them about...Now it looks like there might be a major attack on our base of operations. It is pretty grim because we stay there at night. I have been expecting something for months and try to stay alert. It isn't too pleasant working hard all day and having anxiety over your safety at night. If we fail here, I expect that things will become even grimmer in Laos as we fall back. Johnson really shouldn't have stopped the bombing in North Vietnam. We could have had this thing wrapped up by now.

As always treat what I have said here in strict confidence. Although some of the ideas I express are my own, they might be construed by someone else as official..."

02/23/70 Letter Home.

From home:

"It was quite a relief to receive your letter of February 23rd...I readily understand of course about your being busy.

We have been following all the news accounts of the action in the PDJ and have been concerned naturally of any part you could have been involved with in the operations. Your message came across loud and clear and we are very happy about the end result of your being home with your family and can look at the situation as something in the past. I hope your hazardous adventures are over.

Our political hacks in Washington are starting to bellyache about the operations over there and it is my belief there is a very great lack of knowledge of actualities...

The official news media here do not bar any holds. We know General Vang Pao has 10,000 Meo tribesmen...and that his men are paid and trained by the United States, and also how the T-28s are used..." ²⁸

02/28/70 Letter from Home.

Rebuttal:

"As usual, the reporting media knows half the story or less. VP really wasn't that inactive. It was that we lost a couple strategic positions that allowed the NVA to infiltrate quicker. We never could have held the PDJ. Anyone who says different doesn't know what he is talking about."

03/12/70 Letter Home.

FEPA

Since December, information from our Far East Pilot's Association (FEPA) negotiation team consisting of Bill Korbel,

²⁸ Ridiculous, unsubstantiated claims from Lao government sources regarding the number of enemy forces and equipment, like the enemy helicopters used in the LL attack, are not worth repeating.

Weldon D. Bigony, Harry E. Mulholland, John Zuria, Bruce B. Blevins, Steve N. Stevens, and Phil G. Payton, meeting with company officials at the Sano Hotel, Tokyo, Japan was slow to reach our lower levels. This was probably because negotiations were bogged down and there was nothing positive to report. ²⁹

We were generally naive and not privy to the manipulations and bag of dirty tricks employed by Company management. After the Company legally hired a professional negotiator, probably hoping that the war would end or the issue would just fade away, stonewalling occurred regarding pertinent issues. One helicopter representative, JJ McCauley, became so disenchanted with the stalemate in the talks that he resigned and had been replaced. This suited Mike Jarina, who had wondered about JJ's qualifications in representing the FEPA members. As far as Mike was concerned, JJ had not been elected for the task. ³⁰

Tom Penniman, a former Operations Manager in Udorn who transferred to Taipei headquarters largely because of a demand for his writing skills, did not consider that the Company elicited a firm standpoint and understanding in regard to FEPA. During the course of negotiations and after Vice President of Operations Don Teeters looked at the Association's pay demands, he remarked, *"This means that some pilots will be making over 60,000 dollars a year!"*

Tom remarked, *"So?"*

At the time, Teeters was earning more than that sum and stateside airline pilots about the same amount.

In general, Tom considered the basic concept of FEPA flawed. Granted, pilots flew the aircraft, but overall, the Air

²⁹ While I was in the Crotch visiting Japan, I ate lunch in the Sano Hotel and enjoyed a hot bath and massage there.

²⁹I do not believe Mike was aware that JJ went in my place.

America operation was totally unlike any other airline in the world. Mainly, pilots and assets were spread out over the Far East, there were vast differences in flight equipment, and the dangers involved in the operation in certain areas were dramatic. It was an interesting situation and he waited patiently to see the outcome.

It soon became evident that our people were severely outclassed and incapable of dealing with an expert in the labor relations field. This eventually led to hiring our version of an experienced professional negotiator, James E. Meals, who had the reputation of being well qualified. At 1,000 dollars a day plus expenses our representatives were accumulating in the expensive city, we hoped he would pressure the Company and quickly settle the conflicting issues. At times, Jim could not believe the tactics used against our people.

Finally, with progress at an impasse, negotiations were suspended and Meals reluctantly recommended the ultimate weapon available—a walkout. Consequently, a date for industrial action was established.

Striking was unpopular. No one really wanted this last-ditch effort and the decision arrived at an extremely bad time when news from Laos was so depressing. As the target date for the strike approached and concern in Washington over negative publicity, the donnybrook of semantics and the dire effect a work stoppage would have on all of Southeast Asia, two high ranking officials arrived with the authority to influence the Company to settle with FEPA. We all breathed a sighed of relief and negotiations resumed.

However, as communications later revealed, the Company was still being hardnosed regarding agreements.

"The parties shall continue to bargain on matters of work rules and ancillary items, and no work interruption shall be

called prior to 0600 local time, Tokyo, March 8, 1970, plus a reasonable time for ratification by the Company's management if an agreement had then been reached.

In the event no agreement is reached all prior offers of agreement on particular items shall be deemed withdrawn." ³¹

PHASE TWO OF THE DIEN BIEN PHU MISSION

On the 23rd, with the evacuation of Xieng Khouang Ville well underway, while logging an outstanding fifty landings, Scratch Kanach, Mike Jarina, and Bennie Shaffer crewing Papa Foxtrot Juliet, along with other helicopter crews, worked the Lima-03 and Khang Kho (LS-204) areas, helping to form and bolster a defensive line.

Monday afternoon the B-Bus driver arrived at the house and I was unexpectedly summoned to the airfield. I learned in the CPH office that an unspecified event had occurred in upper Military Region One and the Customer wanted to quickly assemble our exfil unit and extract the Dien Bien Phu team the following day. It was not a good omen from our standpoint. If compromised from being dropped so close to the objective, the team was probably on the run and we could expect the worst possible scenario at the landing zone.

Along with other pilots participating in the mission, I caught a late flight north to Long Tieng on CASI C-47A XW-PFT. As during the initial phase of the Dien Bien Phu raid, the ramp

³¹*Air America Log*, Volume 11, #1 94.
 Author Handwritten Addendum at the end of a Letter to Parents, 02/23/70.
 04/20/70 Letter in the Blue Contract Book sent from Paul Velte to Weldon Bigony Concerning an Agreement between Air America and FEPA Regarding Pilot Project Pay.
 Mike Jarina Interviews.
 Tom Penniman Email.

was brimming with Bell helicopters, and the hostel jammed with crews. With that high number of human and helicopter assets concentrated in one spot at a time of concern and speculation regarding enemy intentions, there was more than the normal anxiety in our group and display of a variety of weapons. Still, the beer drinking and card games did not diminish.

After surviving another restless night at Long Tieng, we rolled out of our beds early to consume a hasty but hardy breakfast. It had to last a long time. This was followed by an abbreviated Gabler briefing, one where he attempted to convey a positive spin on the mission. Lacking details, he again stressed security and the need to deposit all identifying means with a Customer before launching.

Using essentially the same crews and route, we flew to Nam Hang. This leg took less time because the ships were empty except for Customers. Chuck Campbell went to the site in Robertson and Jarina's ship to coordinate A-1E cover and fueling. While shut down, a Caribou pilot landed with fuel drums. Jack Knotts, flying with Dick Elder in the SAR Bell was still relatively new and did not know many of the pilots well. He was sitting by himself when JJ McCauley approached, and after introducing himself, talked for a time.

As during the first mission, the second leg of the flight was conducted at low level to avoid or minimize the possibility of radar detection. Once in the pick-up zone, there was a certain amount of suspense, excitement, and caution until the first troops dressed like the enemy, with communist stars displayed on their hats, emerged from the high grass and boarded.

It was then that the explanation for the early egress was revealed. Apparently upon entering a perimeter village during the course of their movement to the objective, the team

discovered Vietnamese troops had recently switched from winter to summer service uniforms that contrasted with theirs. Still, they hastily pursued the mission goal and then withdrew. On the run from real or suspected enemy, they were chased by tracking dogs and were out of food. After part of the team boarded 14F, Terry Dunn gave one troop a candy bar. The man was so famished that he popped the entire treat into his mouth, including the paper wrapper. At that time, from the disheveled appearance of the men, Jarina concluded that the mission had been a failure. However, despite his impression, probably for the first time, a border mission had been successful in that every man was safely extracted.

After refueling and retrieving the Customers, we returned to Pha Khao where our charges disembarked to undergo debriefing and polygraph procedures.

Soon after landing at The Alternate, I turned 35F over to Don Leach. Then, quizzing Campbell again about the nature of the mission and receiving no more satisfaction than before, I deadheaded home on Papa Foxtrot Tango (PFT).

With several daylight hours left, Jarina rejoined Scratch in Papa Foxtrot Juliet to continue working the Xieng Khouang Ville and Khang Kho areas.

Several days after the mission, Wayne called Mike into his office and presented him with an envelope. Mike was surprised to find five crisp green Ben Franklin bills inside. Wayne then instructed Jarina not to utter a word to anyone or divulge anything regarding the mission, not even his wife. Moreover, those in Washington did not know what had transpired at Dien

Bien Phu. ³² ³³

MOUNG SOUI

After the Lima Lima base was lost, except for one Meo ADC company holding positions around the L-108 airstrip and the fire support base at Phu Khout, there was no other defense for Moung Soui or the T-28 operation there. While we were conducting Phase Two of the Dien Bien Phu operation, Site-108 fell largely by default.

Perhaps the period of time leading up to and the loss was best described by an Author-abridged account of USAF AOC commander Major Jesse Scott, who, as an eyewitness closely viewed the situation:

We never did receive any intelligence from CAS, ³⁴ at Long Tieng. Because we were running about 55 to 60 [T-28] air sorties against the NVA, it was obvious that we would be the next site to be overrun.

³² I kept badgering Chuck Campbell to tell me what we had accomplished. He indicated that he would someday, but this was soon forgotten in the tumult and confusion of future events. Apparently, the mission had been partially successful. The Author assumes that all details of the mission goal are still classified, but years later Author Ken Conboy, without benefit of footnotes, indicated that during a meeting attended by high level officials that rockets had indeed been launched at the Vietnamese regional headquarters. Tom Ahern claimed administration and storage buildings were set on fire. Apparently, something important happened in the valley, and the actual truth is wedged somewhere between the two revelations.

³³ Jack Knotts Interview.
Mike Jarina Interview.
Ken Conboy, 244.
Tom Ahern, 350.

³⁴ CAS-Controlled American source, a euphuism for CIA.

During previous days refugees and then after the loss of LL, soldiers, following T-28s returning from strikes, walked off the plain and streamed through the complex warning all present the bad guys were coming. [Thinking was that] if these people could find Moung Soui, the NVA could also. But denial was the watchword and it was impossible to convince anyone in authority the site was in jeopardy.

The next indication of a problem was villagers evacuating. Thirty people could be seen on a hillside leading cattle. Some would venture into the village and attempt to purchase rice or more cattle. Then they would move on to the south. Soldiers did the same.

CAS at Alternate indicated the soldiers would remain to protect the site. Therefore, the major obtained garbage cans and rice from AID. Then he built fires and cooked rice to try and entice the soldiers to stay in place. After returning in the morning from Vientiane, he would find them gone.

Air Attaches Colonels Tyrrell and Lowery arrived to assess the situation. They were appalled at the site's condition and recommended a general clean-up to instill confidence in the people and foster the impression the operation would continue. However, local villagers continued to leave.

With the enemy closing, on Tuesday evening, Scott returned home to compose a report recommending staging gunships at the site and reinforcing the perimeter with more troops.

Instead of the enemy stopping or slowing the advance to consolidate gains, that night an NVA sapper team created a diversion at Phu Khout and the main body of troops bypassed the forward site in the movement toward Moung Soui.

Scott boarded the AAM C-123 early on the 24th for the flight upcountry. With fighting underway, hundreds of villagers streamed south along the main road. The plane received battle

damage attempting to land, so Scott requested diverting to Long Tieng to inform the people there the large amount of military goods at the site and the necessity to remove what could be used against government troops. The request to land at Alternate was denied, so the PIC of the C-123 returned to Vientiane at approximately 1100 hours.

After weighing options with the AIRA chief, with the situation at Lima-108 in doubt, it was decided Jesse would fly north in a T-28 and access the situation.

He was back by 1400 hours. When he arrived at the AIRA office, he discovered [Colonel] Tyrrell had huddled with the ARMA chief and cobbled together a FAR unit and transportation. However, when reports of the site being overrun reached Vientiane, the airlift to bolster the Moung Soui perimeter was cancelled. When Scott indicated he believed landings were still possible, an attempt to reestablish the operation was half-heartedly attempted. By then it was 1500 and deemed too late to initiate an adequate defense before dark. That effectively sealed the fate of Moung Soui and the immediate area. The prognosis did not look promising for VP's people and the two complexes to the south.

Losing his work place without much effort, a disgusted Scott returned to Vientiane for introspection and reassignment.

AFTERMATH

For two days USAF and T-28 pilots dropped ordnance to destroy supplies and infrastructure at the site.

By the 24th and beyond, all territorial gains of the previous year in Military Region Two had been relinquished to the communists. The Plain of Jars was once again a lethal place for us to fly, and over flight of Moung Soui was to be avoided.

Air Force and Agency assessments noted:

"Almost all the attacks had come at night, many when the weather was bad, and the RLA and the USAF air could not stop the enemy advance. Furthermore, having come to depend on air support around the clock, the ground forces would not hold when the aircraft were not there.

'Vang Pao looks upon air as a magic wand. All he has to say is kill the enemy here and it's done. This worked while he was on the offensive. Then they thought the same way of air on the defensive and they expected air to defend them. When it didn't. They got scared and ran.'"

Of course, an operation of such magnitude that guaranteed eventual public exposure required a critique and a modicum of finger pointing. In March, following the loss of the Plain of Jars, and then Moun Soui, Vientiane Chief of Station Larry Devlin weighed in with his after-action thoughts regarding the final aspects of the Plain of Jars operation:

"L-22 was more convenient as a supply center than important. We don't run VP. We advise him. We had a large defense plan, with four successive lines of retreat. It called for a fighting withdrawal, to hit them with air and then pull out. We mistakenly thought we could teach them defensive tactics overnight. The idea of a phased withdrawal was alien to them. VP was fully briefed on the plan. But it wasn't followed. VP did not lose much manpower but he could have done much more damage to the enemy with better use of airpower...They [the Meo] were on the line constantly from August 1969 to February 1970. When VP was not in the field all action stops. He had no staff."

Air Force historians rationalized a slightly different analysis of the situation:

"Trained by CAS primarily for an offensive role, the guerrillas did not make the phased withdrawal that would have forced the enemy to mass, thereby creating targets for

airstrikes. Some U.S officials understood that VP could not afford the additional losses. After more than eight years of fighting, he had experienced a steady attrition among his troops and morale was low. USAF commanders were concerned that the opportunity to strike the enemy as he massed for attacks was lost." ³⁵

JARINA

With the Plain of Jars offensive concluded, the demoralized troops on the run, and Vang Pao deep in his characteristic, but temporary, funk after a losing proposition, there was a diminished requirement for excess Bells at Long Tieng. Therefore, late Thursday morning, Kanach, Jarina, and Shaffer were reassigned to work in northwest Military Region One. They did not fly much during the three-day period. There were a lot of refugees to move about. While waiting for flights at Xieng Lom, Scratch and Mike played one-on-one basketball.

Noticing an abundance of flies on the passengers, Mike asked or commented regarding the origin of the insects. Bennie offered: *"Whenever a Lao is born, he is issued an allotment of flies and keeps them the rest of his life."*

The first day included missions out of the Xieng Lom complex in western Sayaboury Province that included not only LS-69A, but LS-274, south-southwest of the original Xieng Lom and also numbered LS-69B. The last trip of the abbreviated day took

³⁵ Segment Sources

Jesse Scott Oral History Interview, 36-39.

John Pratt, *Vietnam Voices* 423.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 254, 260 fn 40.

CIA weekly Summary, 02/27/70.

John Pratt *CHECO*, 114.

Bill Leary, March 1970 Notes and Interview with Larry Devlin. *CHECO*.

them to Ban Moung (LS-177), nineteen miles west of Site-274. Either Ban Moung or Ban Houei Lao (LS-147), five miles north had been previously attacked, causing many refugees to move west into Thailand where USAID provided their subsistence until the site became friendly again and the people could move back.

The crew recovered at Ban Houei Sai for a night at the Air America hostel. ³⁶

POTTER

Captain Harvey Potter, First Officer John Beardsley, and Flight Mechanic Joe Gaculais were working out of Luang Prabang on the 25th in H-34 Hotel-46. They were assigned to deliver a load to a 5000-foot mountain (TG1696). The large, more than adequate landing zone was located ten miles southeast of Luang Prabang, at the base of a karst near the Meo village of Ban Long Houay Noi. The pad sloped down and afforded plenty of room to land. It even provided the capability for a slight roll on. However, if one attempted to hover off the landing zone, ground effect was lost. Other pilots, like Mike Jarina, Frank Stergar, and Potter, had previously landed there with no problem.

Beardsley commenced an approach to the red victor signal. After Beardsley lost critical RPM on short final, Potter attempted to recover the turns, but failed. Drastically overloaded for the altitude and conditions, with two fifty-five-gallon drums of water and five passengers, after contact with a rocky slope below the helipad, the aircraft crashed and burned. All onboard managed to exit Hotel-46, but none escaped without incurring second and third-degree burns.

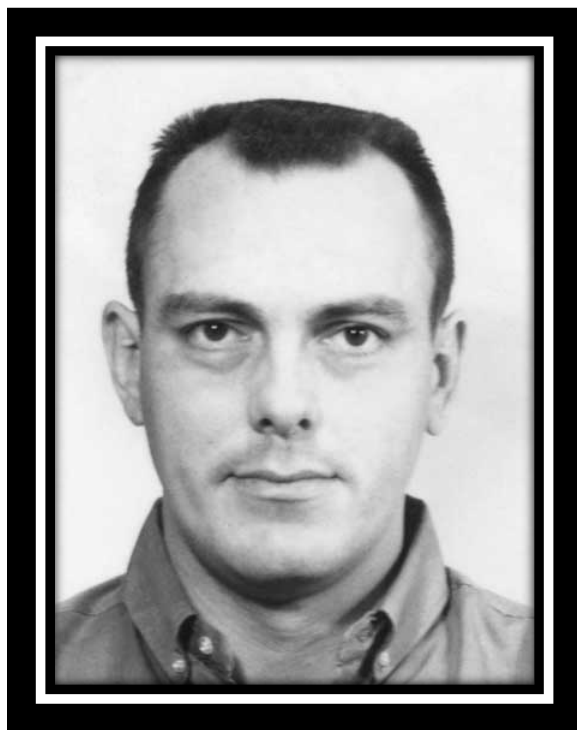
³⁶ Mike Jarina Interview.
Mac Thompson Email.

The injured were recovered by another helicopter crew and delivered to Luang Prabang. Potter, Beardsley, and Gaculais were flown to Udorn on a C-130 and taken to the USAF hospital for overnight treatment and observation before being transferred to a military hospital in Japan that had the capability to cope with serious burns.

Harvey Potter, a long-time employee and excellent H-34 pilot, was well liked by all in our group. He and wife Jean added a lot to our close-knit society. Since he and John Beardsley had been classmates during U.S. Army flight training, Harvey requested that he be allowed to train John in the field. CPH Knight normally enforced an unofficial management policy that did not allow good friends to train each other. However, since Harvey's competency, skills, and especially his positive attitude were far above the norm, Wayne acquiesced to Potter's request.

As part of the investigation, Knight visited the two pilots in the hospital. Both appeared lucid and not too badly burned, but they had inhaled smoke and flames that resulted in dry coughs. During the short interview, Harvey accepted all responsibility for the accident, indicating that he would not have allowed another trainee go as far as he let John go; he simply waited too long to recover the aircraft from Beardsley's error. Internal burns to the men's lungs were far worse than anyone envisioned. After lingering until early March, first Potter and then Beardsley expired.

The accident board headed by Doug Dreifus faulted the instructor pilot for the incident, concluding the cause of the crash was due to overloading as to weight vs. altitude parameters. Yet, in Knight's opinion, the primary cause of the



Air America Captain Harvey Potter.

accident was different: friends do not check out friends. ^{37 38}

As a corrective measure that senior management and insurance agents liked, laminated performance charts and grease pencils were installed in H-34 cockpits. But this was not realistic, for Potter knew how much he was overloaded. ³⁹

Flying less than four hours, on Friday, the crew of PFJ continued their abbreviated refugee work out of LS-69B (LS-274), forty-six miles east in the hills around Phu Hua Moui (LS-67).

³⁷ There was no mention of whether Beardsley had accumulated prior flight time working at elevated mountain sites. Many new pilots, especially former U.S. Navy types, who normally worked at sea level, came to us devoid of mountain experience, and, like my potential incident with Lloyd Higgins in the Hong Sa area, one had to be constantly alert for errors, recognize a dangerous condition, and conduct immediate and corrective action in time to prevent a crash.

There also was no mention of whether the landing was the first of the day. If not, had Potter demonstrated a landing at the same pad with a lighter load and Beardsley at the controls? With Potter's experience, it is easy to assume this was the case, but in actuality, it remains an unknown.

³⁸ There is a sequel to the story: During recovery of Beardsley's effects from the Air America hostel at Luang Prabang, Dreifus discovered a small amount of marijuana and a partially smoked reefer cigarette. Doug chose not discuss this with anyone except Wayne Knight, but was preparing to include the finding in his official report. After a lengthy discussion, Wayne convinced Doug that nothing positive would be served by the revelation. Dreifus agreed. It certainly had nothing to do with the accident and did not include it in the report.

Never having indulged in drug consumption (alcohol was my opiate of choice), the Author is not personally in a position to judge the short-or long-term effects of chemicals in marijuana on the human body. It probably relates to each individual's tolerance to the THC chemical and one's ability to cope with it. However, like an excessive intake of alcohol and its after effects, although not directly under the influence of marijuana, Beardsley might have had some health and judgment issues. At any rate, I would prefer to share the cockpit with someone who was drug free and not hung-over from drinking.

³⁹ Bill Leary, February 1970 Notes.

Joe Leeker, *The Aircraft of Air America*, Hotel-46.

CIA Corporate Files, Report of Aircraft Accident UH-34D, H-46, 02/25/70.

EW Knight Emails, 10/24/00, 10/26/00, 10/27/00.

Mike Jarina Interviews.

Refugee shuttles continued on Saturday out of Xieng Lom. Trips were conducted to Pak Lay (L09) on the Mekong, and Nam Tan (LS-268), seventeen miles southwest of Sayaboury town.

That evening, Jarina deadheaded to Udorn on "Triple Nickel."

MR-2

On Friday, I deadheaded to The Alternate on C-123 545 to fly less than two hours in 35F with Ted Helmers and Phil Velasquez. With bad weather enveloping the area, all we could do was sit, speculate, and stew about future events.

Not content with the rapid gains in ejecting government forces from the Plain of Jars, enemy leaders continued moving a few units south to probe Vang Pao's forward defense positions on the doorstep of Sam Tong and Long Tieng for weakness and to gather current intelligence.

Apparently other small units and a force of battalion strength were advancing toward VP's forward positions at Khang Kho, Ban Na, Phu Pha Sai, and into the lower Tha Tham Bleung (LS-72) valley area. Considered fairly reliable, this information was duly reported by reconnaissance patrols and stragglers returning from the Plain of Jars.

Long supply lines and a lack of large supply caches still viable on the Plain of Jars and in North Vietnam were considered forestalling any substantial offensives deep into government (Meo) territory. However, with several weeks left in the dry season, and a smoky season environment that restricted visibility for cover and hindered Allied interdiction of LOCs, it would not be long before a restocked enemy was ready to march on Long Tieng in earnest.

Despite conducting operations on the front lines for months, Vang Pao still maintained the use of several battalions

to provide defense for the Meo homeland. Taking advantage of a relatively quiet period before the proverbial storm, he had helicopter crews distribute hundreds of troops to several strategic hilltops that lay to the north and northeast of Alternate. These were collectively referred to as the Vang Pao Line. Other troops prepared defensive positions in and on the perimeters of both the Long Tieng and Sam Tong valleys.

In the strategically important Vang Vieng region where the Neutralist garrison was tasked to block the road to Vientiane, no one was really certain if vacillating FAN troops would hold, or break and run, if pressured. Obviously, additional troops were needed to counter the enemy hordes. Therefore, to bolster still viable government positions in Military Region Two, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma continued requests to southern regional commanders for additional reinforcements to defend Route-13, particularly at the critical Sala Phu Khoun road junction north of Vang Vieng. Following the recent drubbing of units on the Plain of Jars, his requests for personnel were not well received by commanders used to having their own way and controlling events in their personal fiefdoms. However, by 7 March four FAR units, of inferior quality and doubtful loyalty to the overall cause in Military Region Two, were forthcoming.

POLITICS

To American advisors staffing the Vientiane Embassy, in what seemed more an enigma than any other clear explanation, the Lao conflict was always considered more a political war than a military one, something many individuals, including USAF and U.S. Army leaders, either did not seem to comprehend or elected to conveniently ignore. After losing the enormous amount of territory encompassing the Plain of Jars, Souvanna no longer enjoyed a position of negotiating from strength with the enemy

in his supposedly neutral country. Consequently, in addition to ongoing backdoor dealing, he publicly declared his intention to request a resumption of the 1962 Geneva Accords.

The Prime Minister's efforts stimulated a response from the Neo Lao Hak Sat, the political wing of the Lao communist front. During the first week in March, a radio broadcast from Hanoi by Prince Souphannouvong's Lao Patriotic Front representatives, presented a comprehensive peace plan reiterating many elements contained in the Geneva Accords, to include all the territory the Vietnamese had won back from the RLG. It also specified a "bombing halt, withdrawal of U.S military advisors and supplies, no military alliances or foreign troops in Laos, free elections, a provisional coalition government of all Lao parties, no encroachment by parties on areas controlled by another and resettlement of the population displaced by pro-American forces."

Probably anticipating something of this ilk, Souvanna countered with immediate and later proposals that included a ceasefire and complete withdrawal of North Vietnamese from northern Laos, International Control Commission (ICC) supervision of the ceasefire and enemy withdrawal, and a meeting of interested parties to seek solutions based on Lao interests as opposed to the international interests of neighbors.

Although displaying a willingness to talk, the proposals were deemed unrealistic, and bilateral negotiations never moved beyond an initial talking stage--at least for the present. It was probably the right move, for the North Vietnamese never had honored and never would honor tenets spelled out in the Geneva Accords of 1962.

Revelation of a first time B-52 strike in Military Region Two after the Vietnamese had recaptured most of the PDJ, and the uproar it caused among doves in the U.S., stimulated another

round of Congressional inquiries into USG's role in Southeast Asia. The Lao situation, although somewhat more publicized now, was still a largely unknown quantity among the masses, but many in the know speculated that military activity in Laos had substantially increased to the point of damaging and perhaps negating the Geneva Accords agreement, that U.S ground forces were involved in combat, and that American air activity had escalated the fighting. Looking forward to the timely conclusion of the Second Indochina War, they feared that these factors would tend to intensify and even prolong the conflict.

To allay and counter these fears, President Nixon's people issued a statement with the Administration's own assessment of the situation. The paper emphasized that U.S policy and goals in Laos strived to reduce U.S involvement, to foster peace in accordance with the Geneva Accords of 1962, and not prolong the war.

Nixon generally repeated and rehashed statements that he had made during late 1969 and early 1970 press conferences: The U.S had no ground combat troops in Laos and there were no plans to introduce any. If such plans evolved, the U.S Congress would be requested to sanction the action; Pathet Lao independence was a facade and there were 67,000 Vietnamese soldiers in the country in strict violation of the Geneva Accords; at the request of the RLG, the U.S had provided logistical and other assistance (under the Military Assistance Program-MAP); the U.S had employed air power to interdict the vast enemy logistical trail system. Four hundred airmen had been lost in the past six years...

None of this information was previously divulged in detail in deference to Souvanna's efforts to negotiate for an equitable balance with the communists in his country.

Stating "facts," some shaded and not correct, the President continued his talk with the American people reassuring them that there were no combat troops in Laos and no plans to introduce any. The total number of Americans in Laos was 1,040. This amount included USG, U.S. military, and civilian contract workers (to read Air America and CASI personnel). No American had been killed in ground combat operations. ⁴⁰ U.S personnel had not increased over the year, but Vietnamese forces had escalated by 13,000.

American policy in Laos was necessarily broad and accommodative in scope. It revolved around providing requested assistance to the elected RLG, protecting Thailand, and saving American lives in South Vietnam. As enemy pressure increased, this resulted in like response through increased military assistance in the form of equipment, training, and logistics. Reconnaissance, and combat support air operations increased commensurate with the situation and at the request of the RLG.

The Nixon Administration's policy, although not always entirely transparent, was abundantly clear in relation to these issues. However, not all Congressional members were convinced of Nixon's motives. Therefore, they continued to examine the funds allocated to support MAP support in Southeast Asia. Eventually this oversight resulted in a tightening of fiscal controls of Deputy Chief Thailand Bangkok, the office in charge of war allocations in Laos and the Royal Lao Air force (RLAF).

Communist reaction to President Nixon's statement relating to Laos followed a standard line. North Vietnamese leaders

⁴⁰ This was a misrepresentation of facts. Two days after the talk the White House announced that a total of twenty-seven Americans, twenty-six civilians, were killed in Laos over the last six years. Six civilians and one Army captain had been killed in Laos since the start of 1969. There was no mention of the number of air crewmen killed or those missing in action.

emphasized portions of the statement dealing with U.S. activities in Laos. Selectively commenting on items, they reiterated their terms for ending the war. They failed to address the part regarding consultations between the signers of the 1962 Geneva Accords. There was also no official comment on the President's report, or any public mention of his appeal to the Soviet Union to assist in restoring peace in Laos. ⁴¹ ⁴²

At this time, we had to contend with many unsettling rumors that the bad guys were approaching our base, and a multitude of other stressful what ifs. Following a restless night, with Vang Pao's young guards making noise to bolster their courage and scurrying around the parking ramp below the hostel, we awoke to discover that a small Meo unit to the east on top of Phou Pha

⁴¹ Dick Nixon, who obtained his law degree at the Author's alma mater, Duke University, evolved onto the political scene as a street fighter. Certainly not a moneyed individual or a Washington participant with cultural benefits like many politicians, he rose through Republican ranks the hard way. Consequently, he was disliked and much maligned by mainstream Democrats and most media outlets. As a person derived from ordinary people, I liked him, particularly when he chose not to squawk over the close and highly controversial Presidential contest with Jack Kennedy in 1960. Moreover, my attitude regarding the man was reinforced when his brother, Ed Nixon, provided my initial flight training in the HO4S (S-55) helicopter at Ellison Field in the Pensacola complex. Unfortunately, I did not complete my training with Ed, who departed the U.S. Navy to assist his brother in his bid for President.

⁴² Segment Sources:

Ken Conboy, 254.

CIA Weekly Summary, Communists restore their control in north Laos, pg 6, 02/27/70.

Central Intelligence Bulletin, Communist forces are beginning to probe government positions south of the Plain des Jarres, 02/28/70.

Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 327.

John Pratt, *Vietnam Voices*, CHECO, 423-424.

Harry Blout, CHECO, f, 32, Obtained from the Dalley Book Service, Christiansburg, VA.

Foreign Relations; CIA Bulletin, Laos: Communist forces are strengthening their hold over the Plain des Jarres, 03/09/70.

Sai had first been probed and then the position overrun during the early morning hours.

Phou Pha Sai, a commanding high point overlooking the lower Site-72 valley and "the backdoor to the Plain of Jars," lay at the end of a long, heavily forested finger, located about eight miles northwest of Padong (LS-05). The wide ridge and associated mountains stretched miles further from Phu Bia, the highest mountain in Laos. For years, we had referred to this entire ridgeline as Padong Ridge for easy identification, and used a low point to transit while working eastern sites. Now, assuming an added element of importance, the site was referred to as Phou Pha Sai in the Long Tieng defense scheme, a segment and eastern flank of what would become known as the Vang Pao Line.

Along with other helicopter crews we spent the day moving men and supplies to critical points in front of The Alternate. This included three Special Missions, delivering troops to the Phou Pha Sai area in order to retake the strategic mountaintop.

Toward the end of the day, we were recalled to Udorn for an obligatory scheduled maintenance inspection in preparation for a return to Saigon. When complete, Helmers and other members of the Saigon continent RTB.

After a month in Saigon, Bob Noble received a letter instructing him to report to the Air Operations officer at the U.S. Embassy. When Bob entered the man's office, he opened an envelope and began counting fifty dollar bills out on his desk. While he was doing this, curious as to what Bob had done to warrant the money, he kept asking Noble why he was paying him the cash. Bob insisted he did not know. ⁴³

After eighteen days on the schedule in February, with additional time included for positioning to sites, standbys, and

⁴³ Bob Noble Emails, 05/11/15, 05/13/15. In Saigon it was illegal to have U.S. dollars unless one was departing for another country.

almost 120 hours flight time, I was both physically and mentally fatigued. I relished a little time off to enjoy family life, rest, and attempt to recover from the combat-induced stresses that had been building in me for months.

Several items prevented full relaxation. Weather in Udorn was hot and humid, even at night, which precluded restful sleep. Not even the liberal use of fans, which merely stirred hot air, provided much relief. Also adding to my unrest, portending a sense of foreboding, the prospect of industrial action in regard to the Company's refusal to recognize FEPA hung over us like the sword of Damocles. I had come to Southeast Asia to work, and certainly did not want to strike, especially when the situation in Laos and upcountry requirements dictated a need for all hands, but I would participate in support of my peers.

"Communist forces are not pressing their advantage in the north. The communists have limited their activities since the capture of the Plaine over a week ago to small probing attacks and other efforts directed at providing the current disposition of government forces. Given the limited number of enemy units involved in this activity and the logistical constraints the enemy now faces, it may be several more weeks before the communists are ready to make a concerted move against government strongholds south and west of the Plaine." ⁴⁴

"USAF does not understand the problems of this kind of war. We're fighting a political war. USAF and Army do not seem to understand the politics involved in decisions. VP runs the war [in MR-2]. The ambassador makes political decisions. We [the Agency] advise him on Tacair, targets, etc., but it is still VP

⁴⁴ Central Intelligence Agency Bulletin, 03/04/70.

who runs the war. I told VP that it's his job to tell the Air Force when and where to put the air, but not how.

I am convinced that slow reliable twin-engine aircraft are needed to find targets. There is a need for A-1s. If the Air Force is told to reduce its sorties, it will have a direct effect on our effort. To take away the air now, we'll never get the guerrillas back into the hills. We'll be back in a guerilla posture. Right now, we need a Lao victory and that can only come through air. Granted we get spoiled on it, but we need it.

The yearly rotation of [Raven] FACs is a problem as it takes a year to learn the area. FAC concept presently is undergoing a change. FACs used to operate in a large area. Now the FAC is becoming part of a five-man team: FCA, CAS, Lao backseater, Meo command, and FAG..." ⁴⁵

⁴⁵Chief of Station Larry Devlin ruminations.

On the first, during a day involving considerable deadheading, I rode to Long Tieng on C-123 293K. There I joined Captain JJ McCauley and Jay Meyers crewing 12F. We headed north for a Special Mission and my deadhead continued with JJ flying to Phu Cum (LS-50A), Phu Vieng (LS-6), and then Bouam Long (LS-32) to refuel. At the first two sites troops were boarded to comprise a team for the projected infil.

We eased cautiously into Site-32, for it had been subjected to desultory offensives at the same time the North Vietnamese Army machine was rolling up the Xieng Khouang base. As during the two 1969 attempts, so far, the enemy had failed to dislodge the several hundred resilient Meo ADC troops. This success was attributed to numerous factors: the harsh terrain, remoteness, and a lack of vehicular roads to the site, the almost 5,000-foot elevation, location on the north side of vast mountain ranges, and a configuration of hilltops overlooking the bowl that afforded interlocking and supporting fire for other positions around the site. Another factor was chieftain Cher Pao Moua's long, rewarding association with Vang Pao. A relative by marriage, he was well supplied with munitions and air support. Lastly, the populace was motivated to remain in place because of the cultivation of what was considered superior opium poppies and the cash or bartered items the product provided.

At the time, fighting was in limbo and there were U.S. military plans to defoliate perimeter vegetation to create additional fields of fire.

We returned to a largely abandoned portion at Phu Cum to await our escort planes. The mission site was planned in upper



Overhead view of a kidney shaped mountaintop Meo defensive fighting position at Bouam Long. Note the zigzag shaped trench system that afforded additional field of fire.

Parker Collection, 95.

Houa Phan Province at UH8370, nine miles east of Houei Kah MOUNG (LS-111) and nine miles north of Hong Non (LS-86), within walking distance of Sam Neua town. The mission was likely to gather intelligence from the locals and observe enemy movement along Route-6 in the direction of either Bouam Long or the Ban Ban Valley.

We launched and navigated sixty-two miles northeast through dense smoke and haze to the intended landing site. By the time we arrived, however, the prevailing wind was adverse and the velocity so high that we could not land safely, so the mission was aborted. We retraced our flight track, dropped the team, and headed back to Long Tieng to spend the night. Tension continued high in anticipation of nighttime sapper attacks, but we managed to get through the night.

Monday morning began with a concerted effort to position troops and crew-served weapons from Skyline Ridge north and east to the hills overlooking Site-72 and beyond. Despite the increasing pall of smoke and haze that restricted visibility and hampered much air activity, the Vang Pao defensive line to the north of the valley was slowly taking shape, but more of everything was required if the Vietnamese elected to send their substantial assets against Long Tieng. Even though many of the forward pads were still under construction, emplacing troops was easy; supplying them with ammunition, food, and water was another matter. Logistics required the constant attention and hard work of many fixed wing and helicopter crews.

Horizontal visibility was reduced to almost zero at times. Therefore, one had to rely on slant range visibility and former knowledge of the area to operate. Perhaps the most difficult problem during the shuttle operation in an uncontrolled environment, despite Charlie Gabler's "Big Sky" philosophy, was the possibility of a dreaded midair collision. Fortunately,

common sense prevailed among the pilot group whereby radioing one's intentions while departing or entering the busy valley was the norm. This was accomplished at checkpoint Peter, Skyline Drive, and all the gaps. However, since the fall of Mounng Soui, increased T-28 traffic and the lack of Meo and Lao pilot language skills, warranted extreme caution. To avoid the busy southeast approach end of the valley, I used what I called the east gap when heading in that direction. A narrow, elevated cut located between karsts, negotiating this pass required climbing a bit, but was generally safe and generally unused by fixed wing. Western departures and arrivals were no problem, for this portion of the valley was fairly broad and would accommodate more than one aircraft. The road junction at Skyline was still considered the preferred route to and from the Sam Tong area.

I logged over nine hours flight time that day, but because of the proximity of the landing zones and frequent shuttles between The Alternate and the pads and ubiquitous five-minute deduction rule, lost almost an hour and a half project pay. With the enemy at our doorstep, this reduction in pay did not seem fair or equitable, but when were the concerns of flight crews ever considered in such issues? ¹

The calm before the storm continued. Under the cover of darkness, dense smoke, and diminished Allied bombing, Vietnamese regiments quietly increased their combat numbers and supplies, and maneuvered closer to our base from points west, north, and east.

Over the next four days, although not quite as active, flight operations were conducted in support of Long Tieng defense. Some of the work entailed shuttling bullets, beans, and

¹ With the Far East Pilot's Association (FEPA) union soon anticipated to be recognized, this pay structure was about to change.

bandages from Padong (LS-05) to positions in the Khang Kho and Phu Pha Sai areas.

On the third, other helicopter crews and ships were directed to RON in Vientiane because of concerns and rumors by natives of sapper attacks on the base. I do not know who my good friend in Operations was, but Jay and I represented the sole helicopter crew remaining at Alternate, probably to evacuate Customers if it became necessary. I could only speculate as to the logic of leaving a ship and crew in harm's way. Was I to be the savior of the castle or a sacrificial lamb on a stone altar?² Because of the distance between the Air America Hostel, Customer quarters on Sky hill, 12F, and youthful guards' itchy trigger fingers, it was doubtful anyone would be able to approach my aircraft without incurring lethal volumes of fire. Moreover, I had already talked to Customers and heartily agreed with their primary plans to walk out of the valley over the southern hills should the situation become untenable.

It was lonely duty, exacerbated when rifle fire directed at shadows began reverberating off the karsts bracketing the parking area.

There were no sapper attacks or probes on the valley that night and some crews returned to work during the day and RON at the hostel.

On Friday Len Bevan replaced Meyers as my Flight Mechanic. That night, after retiring, the litany of nighttime disturbances continued when a hand grenade exploded in the east karst close to the hostel. Disturbing precious sleep, rifle fire continued to shatter and punctuate the normal silence of the inky black Long Tieng valley. Since the gunfire was probably directed at

² The English name Casterlin can be interpreted to mean "Keeper of the Castle."



Looking north at the Long Tieng loading-unloading, and macadam parking ramp. Air America's elongated hostel is located at the top of the ramp. Supply and ammunition are stored in the eight buildings at the top left. The smallest building in the lower left corner of the ramp houses the Agency Air Operations. Various buildings in the lower photo form the SKY compound.

Parker, *The Battle for Skyline Ridge*, 102.

rats or other nocturnal creatures scurrying about, the situation reminded me of Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra's main character in *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha* tilting at windmills.

After flying a little more than one fuel load, I was relieved to be replaced the next day. I do not know about other pilots' approach to difficult situations, but I always had a proclivity to be concerned and to expect the worst. I found that this approach to tenuous circumstances kept me alert, and able to survive...so far. Consequently, in addition to the stress of the current situation that I knew could only end badly, the unknown of when the enemy would attack our base in force, and interrupted sleep, was beginning to have an increasing toll on me.

Despite the smoke and haze, supplies continued to pour into Long Tieng from Peppergrinder, so I deadheaded home on C123 293K and was at the Air America facility by early afternoon. In a system seemingly anticipating FEPA acceptance, we now had a time out provision in our crewmember reports that included about an hour after arriving at the Company facility to allow for checking in with the Operations Department and stowing gear. This all related to crew duty time closely aligned with Stateside FAA regulations.

MR-1

The village of Moung Ngeun (LS-168) was located in a broad valley twelve miles southwest of Hong Sa (LS-62) in western Sayaboury Province, and close to the Thai border. Site-168 was relatively quiet until 5 March, when Pathet Lao who had crossed the Mekong from Laos, overran a FAR outpost, and Moung Ngeun was lost by default. The unexpected action encouraged the troops and many villagers to stream in to Thailand in the Ban Houei Khon

(T-560) area of Nan Province, where a Thai Border Police post was established. Because that portion of Nan was considered a communist insurgent hot spot, one not well controlled by government forces in the past, the Lu refugees were not really welcome.

After hearing about the trouble, AID worker Mac Thompson journeyed from Ban Houei Sai to Nan in a H-34, then was directed to a northern site where a Royal Thai Army (RTA) liaison man joined Mac. They proceeded to Houei Khon to parlay with Lu refugee leaders. Following much discussion, the Thai representative agreed to allow the refugees to remain until Moung Ngeun was recaptured.

Within a week, with RTAF air support and under pressure from troops at Xieng Lom, the Pathet Lao retreated north across the river. This was followed by Lu movement back into the Moung Ngeun valley.

Since the refugees had lost many possessions, Thompson arranged to have a Caribou crew deliver a load of pots, pans, blankets, mosquito nets, and such items to Xieng Lom, after which he intended to have a H-34 crew shuttle to Moung Ngeun. When an H-34 was not available, he elected to use a CASI Porter for air drops. The floor plate was removed and the interior cargo cabin cubed out with high bulk low weight items. Then, with Mac acting as a kicker, they proceeded to the Moung Ngeun valley. The pilot flew a circular pattern in the valley at 200 feet above ground level (AGL) while Mac pushed goods out the drop door.

They made several trips. At one point in the operation, while stuffing more items through the door, the plane encountered an air pocket, throwing Mac off balance. As he reached up toward the rear cockpit seat to grasp the pilots' shoulder harness for stabilization, with a handful of strap in

his fist, his hand continued down toward the floor, resulting in his nearly falling out the drop door. It was then he realized that the Porter was a newer type that had a flexible inertia reel harness installed instead of the fixed harness.

Considerably unsettled over the incident and his near demise, Mac returned to Lima-25 and sent a memorandum to USAID Air Support Branch requesting overhead center line cables like the ones in larger cargo planes be installed on all Porters for kickers to attach safety belts. CASI, a relatively non-bureaucratic organization compared to Air America, responded with an almost immediate retrofit. Air America managers answered that a kicker could fasten a gunners belt to the tie down ring in the floor and never did install a lifeline. Mac conceded that a tie down would work, except if a man fell out the drop door, it would be almost impossible to reenter the cabin. It might work at Lima-25, where the pilot could fly over the Mekong and cut the lifeline, but this would not work in harsh terrain.

Mac Thompson, who served for many years in Laos, was full of interesting anecdotes. There was a small AID office located at the Ban Houei Sai airport. Mac was outside waiting for a Porter to take him to Xieng Lom when he heard a loud bang from the office vicinity. He rushed into the building and discovered that an unknown person had removed his .45 caliber handgun from his carry bag and in the process, discharged a round.³ Since Mac was travelling that day, as was his habit, he had jacked a round into the chamber. A cursory look around the room failed to reveal the bullet's impact.

³ A .45 caliber pistol could be dangerous in the hands of an untrained individual. This was also true for trained personnel if the weapon was not handled properly.

When the Porter pilot arrived, Thompson grabbed his bags and boarded the aircraft along with three Lao troops and a load of rice. On the way to Site-69, they encountered ground fire. An initial look around the cargo compartment interior revealed no overt battle damage. Then Mac removed his camera and discovered the missing .45 slug had lodged in the device. Displaying a bit of humor, he showed the camera to the soldiers saying, "*We did get hit.*"

From time to time, relatively passive attempts to limit opium shipments from Houei Sai were conducted in the northwestern Military Region One region. Since AID controlled all petroleum product distribution at the airport, AID representatives claiming shortages could deny General Ouane's C-47 pilots fuel, which would then have to be delivered from stocks at Luang Prabang.

Since inception of the Lao AID contract in 1953, Lao bound cargo was generally transported through Thailand by the Thai Express Transportation Organization (ETO). In 1956, mandated by a monopoly decree from the Thai Cabinet, ETO became the exclusive transporter of all U.S. military supplies to Laos. In like manner, ETO was owned by individuals in the Royal Thai Government (RTG), and for security, utilized for military cargos by direction of the Thai Minister of Defense. This arrangement had a positive effect of charging all USG agencies an identical transportation rate. The Military Assistance Program petroleum products for Laos were under contract with the Esso and Caltex companies.

Until mid-1969 the ETO contract was negotiated by the Bangkok U.S. Embassy. Then contract negotiations reverted to the USA Support Command at Korat, encompassing USAID and the U.S. military.

When aviation fuel became commercially available at Ban Houei Sai, AID could no longer deny fuel to Ouane's C-47 crews. Anyone who had sufficient money could purchase fuel.

Mac did not know Ouane well and never encountered any problems with him, although he recalled one confrontation: The general arrived and began talking to the Americans, *"You know we love you Americans here. We like the work you do. We like the money, but there is something you should not get involved in--telling the Thai Air Force we have an opium plane going out so they will shadow it and try to shoot it down in Thailand."*⁴

THAI PILOTS

During early March, from the original three, now reduced to two Thai pilots, seven additional indigenous Thai were hired from RTAF ranks and arrived in Udorn to fly the UH-34D. The seven men included: Sompong Maneewun, Tongkam Sougounpan, Kiattiyos Vongprasert, Van U-Muang, Serm Swangpunt, and Manus Disoum. Pilots we referred to with an endearing term as the "Boon Boys," Boonrat and Boonchoo had flown with us for a number of years, were considered proficient, and were universally liked by both Customers and the helicopter pilot group. As evidenced by the experiment with the now defunct Boon Oum Airways, the AB-1 Customer still preferred to employ some Asians because of their political acceptance, non-round-eye appearance, malleability, and proclivity to never question a mission, also to use them for highly sensitive, plausibly deniable operations.

Many innuendos could be factored into the hiring of so many Thai pilots at this particular time. The issue was both confusing and suspicious to our mainstream pilots, just when

⁴Mac Thompson Emails.

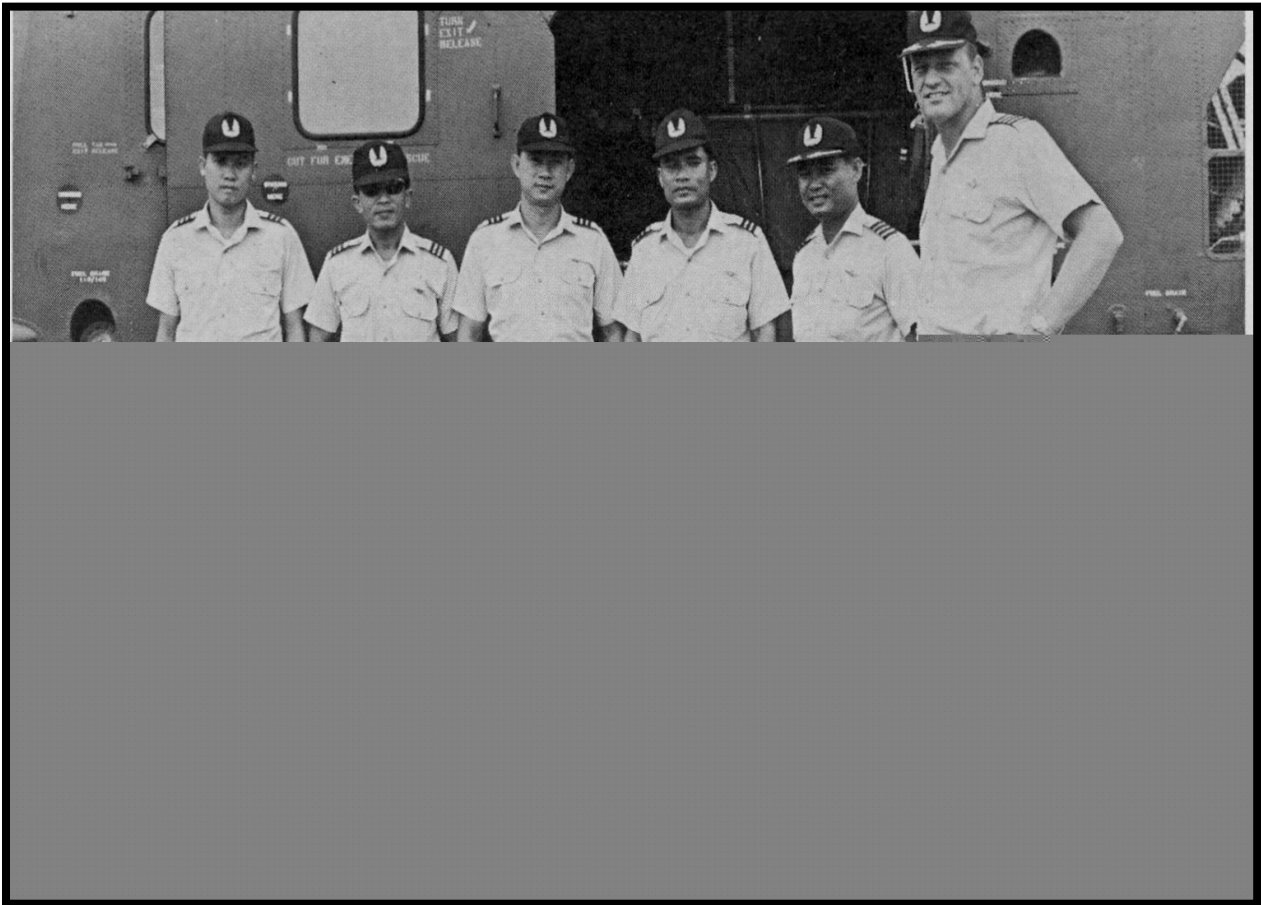
FEPA negotiations appeared to be approaching a phase in the critical end game. To some, the move was construed as a perfect time for the Company to begin pursuing union busting.

However, there were cogent reasons for the hiring. Air America contractual agreements with the Thai government relating to employing Thai nationals at an unspecified time were cited, and perhaps related to the Nixon Administration's Vietnamization policy in Southeast Asia. Moreover, most of the men were deemed as well qualified in helicopters as many Americans now arriving through the Washington-Southeast Asia pipeline. The men were also much less expensive to employ under the lower Thai pay scale. Lastly, there certainly was considerable Thai military and Agency interest in exposing Thai helicopter pilots to the Lao theater, for if the situation there drastically changed and Americans were forced to withdraw, the Thai could easily pass for locals and continue to perform the job.

Although CPH Knight did not consider a large influx of Thai pilots fair to them or to pilots training them, the transition was probably an excellent idea: training allies to a standard of proficiency and attitude that allowed an easy integration into Allied joint efforts. However, younger generation American pilots in the H-34 program were not pleased. They grumbled about possibly having to fly with the Thai. ⁵

Perhaps an attitude of caution was well taken, for not all in the new Thai group were as experienced or accomplished H-34 pilots as the two "Boon Boys." Stemming from radically different flying backgrounds than their American peers, many required initial and continued training assistance to achieve adequate

⁵This was never an issue or overriding problem with the original Thai pilots, as Mike Jarina often flew with Boonrat in the Pakse area. I flew with Sarisporn, whom I considered an excellent pilot, for a week at Sam Tong.



Seven Thai First Officers hired for the UH-34D program at Udorn, Thailand in March 1970. Boonchoo, standing next to the CPH, was a previous hire.

Air America Log, Volume 4, #4, 1970.

proficiency. Knight deemed two of the men so deficient during training sessions that he could never envision the weak ones ever qualifying as a PIC.

As U.S. Marine Corps aviation policy dictated, to prevent damage or loss of scarce helicopters, RTAF flying regulations precluded touchdown autorotations. This was not the case in Air America, where the nature of the job demanded considerably more pilot expertise coping with potential emergencies in the unforgiving Lao mountains. While training one of the men and conducting a full autorotation in which he was following the trainee on the controls, the man froze with the collective in the full down position. It required all Knight's strength to break the pilot's grip and regain control of the falling brick in sufficient time to cushion the touchdown. There was also a story circulating about ACP/H-34 Jerry McEntee training a Thai pilot. Jerry demonstrated a full auto, then directed the man to perform one. They were well into the maneuver when Jerry looked across the cockpit to gage the pilot's reaction. Perhaps praying to Buddha while preparing for death, the Thai man's eyes were inexplicably closed.

Despite his aversion to wasting time retaining sub-par pilots, according to existing protocols, Knight was unable to sack hopeless trainees. Fortunately, there was a requirement for long term or permanent Co-pilots in the program at this time, so he was able to relegate the weaker ones to permanent First Officer status.

Wayne considered some others naturally talented, judging them to perform well in the future. He considered Sompong Maneewun the most naturally talented in the group. Tall, thin Sompong spoke good English. He accompanied Knight during filming scenes in the Agency-sponsored movie titled "Air America: Flying Men, Flying Machines."

After he returned from time off during the middle of the month, the CPH began evaluation and training of some of the Thai pilots, including Manus, Sompong, and Tongkam.

Another group of Thai pilots was hired for the H-34 program in 1972. These individuals functioned largely as First Officers. There was some pressure for the men to join FEPA. Old timer and group spokesman, Boonchoo, entered Wayne's office one day to inquire what they should do in regard to the union pressure. The reply: under Thai law and DHEP's (Thai commanding officer Vitoon) mandate, they were not allowed to become members.

The issue of eliminating Thai pilots from sensitive work was not an overriding one. Boonrat had performed such work years before in the "G" model Bell, flying missions to the Yankee pad in Military Region Three. Instead, because of the need for close cooperation, understanding, and initiative in hairy situations, Special Mission work dictated that all crewmembers speak English to a fair degree. A language misunderstanding at a critical moment might have had devastating consequences. ^{6 7}

MR-2 ACTION CONTINUES

To preclude detection and avoid losses, the enemy maneuvered at night. Under a perfect cover of smoke and haze, the enemy noose tightened on the Sam Tong-Long Tieng complex. After capturing and consolidating positions on the high ground of Phou Kout, located toward the western edge of the Plain of Jars, they were able to move further southwest toward Moung Soui. Two larger columns marched into the Site-108 area, causing the few Meo remaining on the fringes to withdraw toward the

⁶ Actually, most Thais in the UH-34D helicopter program spoke acceptable English and performed well during emergency situations.

⁶ EWKnight Emails, 10/24/00, 10/29/00.

security of the San Luang (LS-41) base. One column appeared to be moving toward Ban Nam Pit and Ban Na.

To the east of Long Tieng, the high ground at Khang Kho had been heavily fortified with barbed wire and air-dropped mines, similar to the efforts that had previously worked so well in the defense of Thateng in Military Region Four. Therefore, rather than risk major losses, the enemy wisely elected to bypass the site and proceed directly toward their next objective at Phou Pha Sai.

Meanwhile, over the next few days at the Sam Tong and Long Tieng bases, the total loss of the Plain of Jars and continuing threat of enemy invasion directly into the heart of the Meo homeland, fostered a general lack of confidence in the ability of Vang Pao to avert disaster. Therefore, many soldiers, along with their families, vacated the sites in favor of safer areas in the surrounding hills, woods, and jungle. It was particularly disconcerting to the people's morale when Chao Saykham, Governor of Xieng Khouang Province, departed Sam Tong believing that the attempt to save Laos was over. Still, Pop Buell and his co-workers remained to monitor and address the situation.

At Long Tieng, Vang Pao labored under considerable pressure again from clan leaders to initiate something positive, including renewing Bill Lair's old plans for a general evacuation to Sayaboury Province.

I had not seen the general for two weeks, but was aware that he had a multitude of problems, especially after crashing in a Porter at Pha Khao and badly injuring his nose. ⁸

⁸ CIA Bulletin, Communist forces are strengthening their hold over the Plaine des Jarres, 03/09/70.
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 254.
Roger Werner, *Shooting at the Moon*.

Regardless of the primary requirement to develop, man, and supply the growing number of forward defensive positions, Agency attention was still directed toward discovering the nature of enemy movements in Houa Phan Province through the auspices of scattered Meo road watch teams.

On the ninth I was scheduled for a day flight to join Dick Elder and Flight Mechanic Daniels conducting a Special Mission in the far north. As with the mission on the first, this required an even more inordinate amount of deadheading to reach PFH. I left Udorn early for Wattay Airport at Vientiane on Hotel-52. After checking in with operations, I boarded C-123K 374 for Sam Tong. From Site-20 I caught a ride on Hotel-68 to The Alternate. As Dick Elder had already gone north to work in the Phu Cum-Bouam Long area prior to the mission, I boarded 13F with Nikki Fillipi, another crew participating in the mission, for the launch site at 50A.

At the specified time our group of Bells and cover aircraft proceeded northeast in the direction of Sam Neua to high ground south of Pha Hang (LS-205). Dick Elder, who appeared recovered from his 1969 back injury, flew, while I attempted to navigate through the dense smoky conditions. Over a period of an hour and a half, we inserted the men, who would then move east to favored observation areas overlooking Route-6.

Since there was still daylight remaining and work to perform, Elder dropped me at Site-32 to wait for a ride south. Transportation emerged in the form of an Air America Porter pilot flying N359F. From Long Tieng I rode in Hotel-30, recalled for scheduled maintenance. In leaving the area, I missed the fun on the tenth.

JUST ANOTHER DAY UPCOUNTRY

During early 1970, there were three A-1 squadrons based at Nakhon Phanom (NKP): the 602nd Fireflies, the 1st Hobos, and the 22nd Zorros. They contained two types of A-1s, the majority being the two-seat E model and a lesser amount of single seat H models. For SAR duty, two Jolly Green crews repositioned to Nakhon Phanom daily. Two A-1s, also known as Sandys, constituted a portion of a five-minute alert standby team. Also included in the unit was a tanker to refuel the helicopters while airborne.

Early Tuesday afternoon Firefly-22 and 23 worked with a Raven pilot out of Long Tieng attempting to destroy a tank located on the southwestern Plain of Jars. During climb out after a low pass to deliver a napalm canister, the engine in A-1E-Firefly 23 lost all power and quit. Although oil pressures and temperature were in the green, the engine failed to restart. Therefore, using airspeed to gain altitude, Captains George Luck and Don Combs headed toward the edge of the Plain and bailed over an unfriendly rice paddy area.

Dick Elder, flying Papa Foxtrot Hotel out of Long Tieng, heard the Mayday call transmitted in the blind from the Raven pilot and headed toward the area. En route, he called Nikki Fillipi to join him in the SAR. When the two Bells arrived overhead about fifteen minutes later, Squadron Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Dick Michaud flying an H model Skyraider, was still busy hosing down a tree line and making additional passes along an almost dry streambed near Combs, who was wounded and still attached to his parachute. As Firefly-22 declared "Winchester," an F-4D pilot equipped with a gun pod arrived to join the fracas. With the enemy wisely keeping their heads down, and as ground fire tapered off to desultory proportions, Elder began spiraling down from 2,000 feet directly over the downed pilot. In the process, his ship received two rounds. Dick

arrived at a hover as close as possible to the downed pilot, but the man's chute kept filling with air and gyrating wildly. With the possibility of the large nylon canopy enveloping the helicopter rotor system, Elder moved away from the danger and requested Firefly-22 to call the pilot and have him jettison the chute. This accomplished, Dick moved back into position and landed, while Shaffer exited the cabin to aid the largely incapacitated Captain onto Papa Foxtrot Hotel.

Elder then departed and asked the Skyraider pilot aloft for the second pilot's location. Michaud described the area and conducted a low pass to show the way.

Luck, who was not besieged, was concealed in bushes. Since Dick's Bell was not equipped with a 205 internal hoist that day, Elder asked the colonel to have Luck move up a hill to a clear area. As Elder came to a hover, Luck moved through the trees at high port, stepped on the skid and pulled himself into the cabin. They headed to Sam Tong where the pilots were offloaded at the hospital and Elder returned to what we called "normal" work. Doctors administered first aid to Combs' groin wound and then the men were ferried to Udorn on a Caribou.

Since the USAF SAR unit was standing ground alert at NKP at the time of the downing, at least an hour away from the downed site, Elder's immediate reaction reemphasized Air America's ability to rescue downed aviators in a timely fashion before enemy troops could spirit Americans away to captivity and prison if Vietnamese, or death if Pathet Lao. ⁹

⁹ Bill Leary, 10 March 1970 Notes that included statements regarding the SAR from participants Dick Elder, George Luck, and Richard Michaud.

UNION AT LAST

"Flash! FEPA won. The Company has signed a contract including, I understand, most of what we wanted. All reports are not in yet but we will get a substantial pay raise. There was no strike, but it had to go to the eleventh hour and a strike was threatened. We hired a professional negotiator toward the last and I imagine he tipped the scales. The State Department got so unnerved about the whole thing that they flew a man out from Washington with orders to settle the thing. 'They said it couldn't be done, so they went ahead and did it.' An adaptation of a poem I once read. I'll let you know more when I get it."

03/12/70 Letter Home.

The contract was signed on 12 March by Paul Velte, the Treasurer-Comptroller of Air America, and the President of FEPA, Weldon Bigony. It was witnessed by Company representative Jim Walker and Company pilot representatives Harry Mulholland, Phil Peyton, W. Korbelt, Bruce Blevins, and Steve Stevens. Ratification of the agreement was next on the agenda. The agreement had been drafted almost verbatim from a Trans World Airlines (TWA) contract, and some of the items were not logical, as they pertained to our operation. Since there were still minor factors to be addressed, it would require time to correct these to the satisfaction of all parties.

FEPA members received almost everything asked for in the negotiations, especially serious issues like hazard pay, or concerns over safety, or health subjects. However, each improvement required time to enact because of the lengthy communication channel through the Company, the Customer, and then obtaining everyone's agreement. Every pilot, even those who were not members of FEPA, benefitted equally under the newly

signed contract, which also involved increased management pay. All received a boost in pay--other crewmembers like Thai pilots and Flight Mechanics were not included--and increased benefits, but overall, I think we helicopter pilots and small STOL aircraft pilots who worked in the trenches benefitted the most. Although I did not want to see anyone lose benefits, it was particularly satisfying in that now the operation in Laos was even more equitable between big bird fixed wing pilots, who flew at high altitude, and low flying helicopter pilots, who were more subject to ground fire.

Explanations regarding some aspects of the operation were forthcoming. For the first time since Abadie informed me in 1962 that we received project pay for getting shot at and hit, the term was no longer nebulous. The subject was clearly defined as:

"Project operations are those operations flown by pilots which are within the normal operations limitations of the equipment requiring the pilot to transport hazardous cargo or operate into and/or out of marginal landing areas or into or out of areas where operating conditions are below levels normally expected or waived operations or operations over man-made or natural obstacles or extremely remote areas and operations within hostile territory or territory reasonably suspected of being hostile."

After all the "I's" were dotted and the "T's" crossed, each member of FEPA received a Blue Book spelling out provisions of the contract between the Company and the Far East Pilots Association. The contract was detailed and very comprehensive. It would remain in force until 31 December 1972, then would renew at three-year periods unless there was a desired change, which would be negotiated solely on the basis of then desired change.

Most of us greedy devils were keenly interested in the new pay structure. My pay immediately increased 1,000 dollars a month, and except for station allocation and project pay, was retroactive to 1 January 1970. For the first time, regardless of how little we flew, and replacing former base pay, we were guaranteed seventy hours, based on flight pay per hour and longevity pay. Mine amounted to a little more than twenty-five dollars per hour. Actual pay was based on a complicated formula, factoring either total trip hours or block time, whichever was higher. Other perks were increased. Station allowances would rise to 215 dollars per month; project pay to twelve dollars and fifty cents. This reflected our more dangerous operation working close to the ground, with a total percentage of flying hours for Udon helicopter pilots calculated at ninety-two-point five percent project. Better reflecting overall industry standards, our life insurance rose from ten to twenty-five thousand dollars (reflecting their stroke, pure jet pilots received even more). After a certain number of years with the Company, yearly increases reflected Company longevity. Now, a hundred-hour month for me would amount to about 3,800 dollars--not too shabby for a helicopter pilot with a worthless college degree.

Regardless of monetary increases, which at last acknowledged and tended to better reflect our chapter's battlefield risks, the job was still the same. Moreover, we were still the same. A contract or a union did virtually nothing to create a better pilot. However, there were tacit agreements between principals that we would police our own pilot force, attempt to maintain Company rules and regulations, and strictly adhere to professional safety standards. The watchword was professional piloting. We would see...

Perhaps two of the best written or unwritten elements of our FEPA organization were: Now no one in management could

simply ram an unpopular agenda down our throats without recourse, or dare say to us, *"If you do not like it-quit."* Another was in the form of a selected mediator to discuss and resolve serious grievances with local management types. Depending on the subject matter involved and the individual proposing it, a real or imagined grievance had the capability of being abused if not handled diplomatically and correctly by a skilled arbitrator.

There were still subjects requiring resolution. Because of a seniority issue that now required bidding for aircraft slots, CJ Abadie believed it would be difficult to operate with flexibility in a manner desired by the Customer, particularly in regard to seniority and envisioned Special Projects activities.

"Special Projects...certainly did not lend themselves to discussions beyond the people on the missions and 'group' negotiations with a union would have been extremely difficult. Somehow things were worked out over the long haul and most of the missions were conducted with a group of dedicated crews who never got the recognition they deserved. The recognition...is not money, but a personal 'thanks' from our upper management and from the Customer."

This subject would surface in the near future and initially cause trouble.

"I imagine you members of FEPA are happy to have things going your way and that there will be no more unpleasantness."

03/19/70 Letter from Home.

Dated March 14, 1970, a second revision of the Constitution and By-Laws of the Far East pilots Association was distributed

to members. Covering many subjects, it delineated the comprehensive objectives of the organization:

1. To operate as a non-profit employee-representing association, not for pecuniary gain.

2. To promote the interest of the profession and to safeguard the rights, individually and collectively, of the members.

3. To establish and exercise the rights of collective bargaining for the purpose of making and maintaining employment agreements covering rates of pay, rules and working conditions for the members of FEPA and to settle promptly disputes and grievances which may arise between such members and their employers.

4. To endeavor to further the aims and progress of the employers by promoting safe and efficient operations, maintaining high standards of professional conduct and promoting good customer relations.

5. To establish fair rates of compensation, maximum hours of employment, and uniform principles of seniority for members of FEPA and to seek adoption and perpetuation thereof.

6. To represent employees in dealing with the employer concerning grievances, labor disputes, wages, rates of pay, hours, and other terms and conditions of employment.

7. To disseminate news in any manner to keep the membership alert and well informed.

8. To levy initiation fees, appropriate dues and assessments upon its members in accordance with its Constitution and/or By-Laws, so as to provide the funds for FEPA to carry on its business, including but not limited to all necessary expenses, emergency or otherwise.

9. To determine if beneficial and enter into agreements, contracts, or make suitable and legal provisions for pension,

insurance, annuity, retirement, and/or disability benefits for all members of the association through legislation, collective bargaining and all other proper means.

10. To consider and if advantageous affiliate with other employee organizations of local, state, national or international jurisdictions.

11. To promote the professional interests of the members and to protect their individual and collective rights to such economic, educational and other benefits and services as the members may be entitled to.

12. To do any and all acts consistent with and in furtherance of the achievement of these objectives. ¹⁰

THE AMAZING SOOTHSAYER

We had the former bonze fortune teller who ministered to family needs come to the house again for a reading. After the old boy spread his paraphernalia on the floor, lighted candles, and completed his incomprehensible incantations, as before, he predicted a grim year for me. Naturally, that made me feel great. This revelation resulted in the immediate preparation of a magical solution to reset the odds and eliminate all the bad spirits that might plague me. Although a bit skeptical, I generally did not scoff at his predictions, for I was well aware that there were indeed times when I had no control over a situation and needed all the good fortune that could be mustered. Moreover, the man was considered an excellent seer. Earning his bones time after time, he had predicted a bad year

¹⁰ Tom Penniman Email.
CJ Abadie Email, 02/21/00.

Letter in the Blue Book from Velte to Bigony, Company Acceptance of FEPA Compensation Proposal and Definition for Project Pay; Far East Pilots Association Constitution and By-Laws, Revision #2, 03/14/70.

for Charlie Carlson. In addition, he predicted that the older son, Tua Nisagonrungsee would return home after a seven-year absence. Khun Yai told the old man that if Tua came home she would give him a bottle of Mekong whiskey. He collected the foul-tasting spirits, for Tua actually showed up at the family house with a wife and children on the exact day the soothsayer had predicted. The old man was amazing, someone to never question or trifle with.

We were summoned to Khun Yai and Khun Ta's house to meet Tua, the long-lost son. He and his family had been travelling for some time, and were disheveled from their travels. The children displayed distended bellies that indicated the presence of worms and parasites, which needed to be eradicated.

Through my wife's interpretation, I learned that Tua had been working for the United States Operations Mission (USOM, USAID) for several years in southern Sayaboury Province at Pak Lay, Laos. Like many young men of the day, Tua was restless and had left for Laos to seek independence and to earn a good wage.

USOM was constructing a road through the mountains from Kang Khao to Pak Lay on the Mekong River. An airstrip was built at Kang Khao and at Sayaboury. For five years, he worked with two other Thai men and two American bosses who treated him well. At times Meo arrived from the top of the mountain to purchase colored cloth and long hair wigs.

After completing his tour with USOM, Tua married the Ban Nam Lang village chief's daughter in the vicinity of Pak Lay. Sometime later, FAR soldiers arrived to conscript young men for the Lao army. One of his wife's brothers had already been taken. The recruiters were taking any man up to forty years old. Even twelve-year old youngsters were press ganged into the army if considered mature enough. Hearing this and not wanting to participate in any war, the men and boys of the village ran

away. At the time, Tua was working the family farm on the hill above the village. Seeing several men running away from something, he inquired, *"What are you running away from?"*

"From soldiers trying to get people for the war."

Tua had no inclination to fight, so he ran with the other men. He hid all day, taking to a stream and breathing through a straw reed to evade the persistent soldiers. The village males hid in the jungle and woods for two days and then returned to the village after the soldiers moved on to another location.

USOM representatives had completed construction work in the area and were not present to vouch that he was merely a Thai worker and not Lao. Therefore, Tua decided he would eventually be caught and conscripted into the army. The only option was to depart Laos for Thailand.

After recuperating and regaining their health, the family was settled in a small wooden house for which Khun Yai provided the funds and had built on the family farm east of Udorn on the outskirts in the Nong Boa area off the Sakon Nakhon highway. The two-hectare plot of land contained numerous mango and other fruit trees from which Tua harvested produce to provide a living for his growing family. Across the dirt road from the farm was an area where Ho Chi Minh was reputed to have secretly lived in late 1929 while recruiting and organizing an early communist movement in Udorn and the northeast region.

"As far as you having a year of bad luck, forget it. You are smart enough to know life is what you make it. Maybe a little superstition will help keep you on your toes, just so you can be on the alert for the unexpected. I think even I could have predicted Charlie's future.

By the way, I never heard you or Tuie mention she had a missing brother."

03/19/70 Letter from Home.



Tua Nisagonrungsee's stilt type house located amid many lush fruit and shade trees at the family farm east of Udorn, Thailand.
Author Collection.

LARRY EGAN

No one really knows, but it seems that continuous helicopter combat flying eventually exacts either an extreme physical or mental toll on pilots. Since the Company provided no psychological or psychiatric services to employees, dealing with thorny issues was strictly up to the individual. By employing various methods, some were able to manage their demons; some could not. Those who suffered constant nightmares or upcountry issues applied for transfer to fixed wing programs or departed Southeast Asia for other less stressful commercial aviation pursuits or vocations. From long experience in the aviation business, the Company had developed and instituted excellent and workable schedule time off (STO) and home leave programs. Management's intention and goal was tailored to temporarily distance the pilot from the immediate pressures and stresses of the job, hopefully rejuvenate the individual, and help promote a fresh perspective relating to work. Company methodology was generally successful with most individuals, particularly during the long home leave period.

Like many people in our group with mental issues to varying degrees, Larry Egan also had a problem. However, no one realized how serious his condition had progressed to such an alarming degree until after Harvey Potter died. Previously, he had been overly obsessed regarding upcountry landing zone improvement, money, rotary wing management, and other issues. These items were not considered too problematic, for many of us advocated identical agendas, but perhaps not to Larry's extent.

As Larry's problems accelerated out of control, he began drinking heavily. This led to bizarre episodes like streaking naked while chasing his wife, Terri, around the housing complex across the street from the Chet Compound. This and other similar incidents caused him to be medically grounded pending further



UH-34D Captain Larry Egan



Center-Larry and Terri Egan. Left-Charlie Davis. Thai Flight Mechanic
in rear. Pogo Hunter's back.

Steve Nichols Collection.

examination. With nothing to occupy him, he was spending a great deal of time at the Club Rendezvous bar.

There was a lot of speculation as to the basis of Larry's unstable condition. Reputedly, he had a medical problem while still in the USMC. Larry's tall, beautiful, dusky Brazilian wife indicated that the Silver Star recipient had been under a doctor's care for mental instability.¹¹

Others, but not all, believed that he had a serious problem with his wife. One time on STO he brought her along to stay at the Air America house in Pattaya with the diving crowd. Terri was observed treating Larry badly, calling him an idiot and dumb because he did not possess an education equivalent to her master's degree. While engaged in a bridge game, the reputedly highly intelligent and patently articulate woman constantly berated him. It was obvious to others that she considered she knew everything, Larry nothing, and he was beneath her exalted status. Larry, although quite intelligent in his own right, might have developed an inferiority complex from this constant browbeating, but others believed a much deeper-seated problem contributed to his mental issues.

Not long after Harvey Potter died, Larry was in the Club eating breakfast. Spotting Knight and Abadie, he walked to their table and began issuing negative comments about Wayne being at fault for Harvey's demise. Since Larry was already grounded for his previous antics, they shrugged off his spiteful comments as someone not playing with a "full deck of cards." Considering his abnormal talk a matter for medical authorities, Ab was not particularly perplexed.

¹¹ Today, Larry's condition would be diagnosed as post-traumatic stress (PTS).

Larry's condition presented a distinct conundrum and elicited considerable sympathy among his peers. Mike Jarina considered Egan a good person. Mike had flown with him at Mugia Pass carrying heavy loads and noted nothing adverse regarding his attitude or flying ability. They also enjoyed scuba diving together offshore at Pattaya beach, and Mike maintained that he could discern much about a person during such activity, particularly the individual's self-control.

After extended home leave and subsequent termination while undergoing a divorce, Frank Stergar reapplied for a job with Air America. He was hired and reached Taipei on 3 March. After satisfying check-in procedures, he was reassigned to Udorn shortly afterward. On 15 March, Knight conducted refresher training with Frank in H-34s Hotel-52 and 57 during FCFs.

During his previous tour, Frank Stergar's wife Francis and Terri Egan were quite close and the families enjoyed each other's company during the early days. Now as a single man, Frank continued visiting Larry and Terri. Frank liked Larry, but noted that in his stateside absence, a considerable change had occurred in the man. Egan was obviously unstable, and while flying upcountry cut Frank off twice causing Stergar to take evasive action.

Since the military situation dictated heavy workloads and we were involved in different programs, I was unaware of Larry's overriding problems. If I heard a smattering of talk, I probably paid little attention to them as being yet another unsubstantiated story.

During one of my infrequent breaks from upcountry work, I was at the Company facility checking the mail and attending to other mundane matters. Afterward, as was my custom, to suck up a little air conditioning and thirst-quenching beer, I repaired to the Club bar. During early afternoon the bar was relatively

quiet, and not yet well patronized. Seated at the far end of the long curving bar, JJ McCauley was conversing with another person. Egan sat alone at the center. I considered this a bit strange as we generally enjoyed congregating, talking shop, swapping jokes or stories. To me, Larry was a friendly, intelligent, upbeat person, and I supposed he wanted his solitude. He appeared happy to see me and invited me to sit down. While chatting, we had a couple of beers. Then his demeanor changed. I did not know how long he had been drinking and thought perhaps he was snockered. Before long, in addition to talking in what sounded like gibberish, he was trying to tell me something that I found difficult to fathom at the time. He was aware that I had obtained a psychology degree from Duke University, and often referred to this fact during our conversation. One item led to another and his dialogue became even more confused. It culminated in a play on words, "*You better dick Ford before he dicks you. You know what I mean? You know what I mean?*" After he repeated this several times, I thought he was perhaps trying to be humorous or had recently experienced a run-in with Ab's Assistant Base Manager Dick Ford. Dick was a nice person, and I wondered what on earth might have triggered such animosity. Puzzled, not knowing what to make of Larry's curious tirade, I grinned and passed it off. Then Larry abruptly departed for the head or other environs.

While finishing my beer and preparing to leave for home, JJ called to me and, in a subdued, conspiratorial tone indicated Larry was nuts. At first I was shocked. Then, after reflecting on Egan's recent actions and statements to me, I concluded that yes, they could be construed as irrational and he was probably attempting to tell me in his own convoluted way that he was suffering mental problems. But even though my education was long in the past, I was well aware that many of us were also somewhat

suppressed walking, talking certifiable loonies, only waiting for the right trigger to set us off.

As a psychology major, studying the intricate physical and elusive workings of the human brain and its interaction with external stimuli was a required portion of the curriculum. It had been years since I attended old, decrepit Professor Doctor Lundstrom's interesting abnormal psychology course. Highly touted by others who had attended the course, we were warned that we would be examining ourselves for abnormal symptoms discussed during the course. The respected professor, reputed to be one of the last cognitional psychologists in the world, was also a renowned hypnotist. As a highlight of the course, we anticipated a demonstration, but his failing health precluded the addition of this added perk. Tailored as a two-semester course, Lundstrom did not even complete the first, and sadly the ailing man expired soon afterward.

I continued my interest in the brain and later researched and wrote a term paper regarding the relatively new tranquilizer drug reserpine to satisfy requirements for an intensely interesting physiological psychology course.

Overall, I considered that what was occurring recently upcountry in Military Region Two affected all of us helicopter pilots negatively to some degree, so I brushed Larry's current condition off as a temporary condition that would eventually improve with rest and time off the flight schedule. A case in point was my monumental drunk after the near shoot down in North Vietnam during June 1965.

I could not have been more wrong. Later in the day, Terri saw Frank Stergar at the Club and said Larry had been drinking and ranting, and she was afraid to go home with the baby.

Frank went home to the house near "five-baht alley," where he had lived since returning to Southeast Asia without Francis

and their daughter Kathy. Captains John Ford and Tony Byrne also lived there. Frank was so concerned about Larry's present condition and the potential danger to Theresa that he called Mike Jarina at the Duck House. Together, they drove to Larry's house to evaluate and possibly help calm the situation. They talked for some time with Larry, saying they were good buddies and recalling the good times diving in the Gulf of Siam. Despite still being under the influence of alcohol, Mike thought the man appeared more controlled and stable. Therefore, he said, "*Larry, it is late and we have to go home as we both have flights tomorrow.*" But Egan wanted them to stay and have a drink. ¹²

While Mike and Frank entered the car and prepared to leave, Larry approached the vehicle swearing, and in his paranoid state yelling that they were not his friends. Then he attempted to kick Frank through the open window. Frank began rolling up the window, but when Larry started climbing through the window, Frank reached out, clobbered, and dropped him. They carried Egan in the house then collected Terri and the baby and took them to Frank's house, where taciturn, pipe smoking AR Byrne served as chief babysitter.

Later, Mike, who was concerned Egan might venture into town and encounter serious trouble, called Base Manager Abadie and related the incident. Ab, who considered Larry's problems well beyond his scope and jurisdiction, initially did not want to do anything. Jarina, aware that the USAF doctors possessed drugs to calm individuals, recommended he refer the matter to them.

Abadie balked, but having second thoughts, eventually contacted the Air Force hospital and reported his current

¹² Both Mike Jarina and Frank Stergar normally drank moderately or not at all.



The "Duck House," the raised, wooden, tin roofed structure where Mike Jarina and others lived in Udorn, Thailand.

Jarina Collection.

dilemma. Military people soon arrived at Larry's house. They restrained him and administered an injection, rendering him unconscious. Egan was evacuated to a hospital and then was sent home. Captain Chuck Frady was horrified when assigned to watch Larry on the flight to Hong Kong while en route to the States.

Since an episode like this had never occurred before, Larry's condition was a shocking revelation to our small community. We were all concerned and wondered what might have possibly triggered his problem. Because of the combat flying stresses or years of habit, drinking was an integral part of an aviator's life. Many, but not all, participated. However, one never knew the intricacies involved in a person's actual personality, reaction to excess alcohol, or what they really thought of you until they were drunk. Over time similar problems would surface.

There were many subsequent theories relating to the causes of Egan's condition. Jarina, for one, did not believe flying was the overriding problem. We were all volunteers and could depart Air America at any time we wished. Even though pressures were mounting, we were all aware what the job entailed. Moreover, one had to have confidence in his ability to know if he could perform the mission and if the overall risk was acceptable. You were not going to subject another's life to excessive danger. To Mike, Larry Egan seemed to be operating within these guidelines. However, everyone had their own breaking point.

Larry Egan ended up in San Diego, California, where he drove a taxi and maintained a modicum of stability by closely monitoring his sodium balance. ¹³

¹³ This was feasible, for excessive drinking and its diuretic effects could easily disrupt a person's sodium balance.

He died sometime later. ¹⁴

HANDLING THE HEAT

Without benefit of shade trees, and devoid of any insulation our tin-roofed house was impossible to cool. Of course, the second story received the brunt of the daily heating and retained residual heat well into the night. To ward off the oppressive heat of the dry season, Tuie purchased a second or third hand air conditioner from a shop in town. It was a piece of expensive junk, but afforded the boys a couple of nights of restful sleep before freezing up and failing to operate. Technicians came to the house and failing to repair the unit removed it to the shop. Another one was promised, but I was not home when it was delivered.

To moderate the heat of the day, we took the boys swimming at the Club pool, one I had helped build years before. The pool was a popular gathering spot for bored pilots' wives and indigenous children. However, with negative memories of construction still bothering me, we rarely partook of the recreation. Pete loved the water and had no problem. On the other hand, Rick who was not very proficient and had coordination problems needed much more time in the water. Still he tried, but when he went under and did not come up, I had to pull him out. The pool was not very deep and he did not answer when I asked him why he did not bounce off the bottom to surface and obtain air.

¹⁴EWKnight Emails, 10/24/00, 10/27/00, 10/29/00.
Mike Jarina Interviews.
Frank Stergar Email.

GOLF...OF A SORT

A golf course of sorts was established on the outskirts of the city near the Border Police camp. It was rudimentary compared to the fine professional courses in the world or even those in Bangkok. The greens were sand and no normal fairways existed. The course was built around a Thai administration building a couple hundred yards from the first tee.

When school was out in 1966, Mike Jarina's family relocated to Thailand. On a whim, his wife Di brought him golf clubs. After the course was established, Mike and others spent time there for exercise and the joy of the game. Having played on sand greens in Europe, Mike was not challenged by this deterrent, but for most Air America people it was a new experience. Over time the golf course was improved and actual grass greens established.

A former PARU sergeant who had been stationed at Na Khang, Laos, worked at the facility and became good friends with all the Air America people who played golf. It was reputed that he had been wounded in the groin during one of the enemy encounters at Site-36, and as a result had been castrated. The Air America types, being the ultimate humorists, used to yell Na Khang instead of "fore" when an errant ball was detected.

On several holes one had to circumvent the administration building. From experience, Thai workers left the windows open to prevent breakage. Not content with just golf, another game was devised whereby cash prizes were awarded for driving balls through a window. So much was allocated for hitting a sergeant, so much for breaking a typewriter. However, the offender was obliged to pay for any damage.

Wayne Knight often played golf there. Located in the direct line of a long drive, the headquarters building could be reached by an energetic player. One day his partner hit the alarm bell

on the front veranda of the building. This caused some exciting moments for a short time.

Another morning, Wayne was playing with JJ McCauley. JJ had a hangover and an upset stomach as a result of late-night imbibing. On the first hole, following a powerful swing, vomitus eruptus resulted. JJ was a mess and since there was no way to clean him, JJ got in the rear of his pickup truck and Wayne drove him home. It became one of Knight's dirtiest golf stories.

AB-1's chief, Pat Landry, and his golfing buddy Case Officer Doug Swanson (Cobra), played the course. While signing the book, Pat noticed someone had written CIA. Upset, instead of going home after the game, he waited for the individual to arrive at the admin building and sign out. Pat accosted him pointing to the name entry and saying, *"What are you trying to do, be funny or something? What is your problem? You do not write that sort of thing on the book."*

The man replied, *"That is my name. Charlie Ivar Alston. I have signed my name that way all my life."*

Pat did not know what to say. It was likely the first time the abrasive man had found himself at a loss of words. ¹⁵

Later, because of a perceived need for liquid refreshment, lacking on the golf course, the Captain's Club was built by Don

¹⁵After Landry and Swanson retired, they both sued the Agency for a large amount of back pay. They had meticulous records of all the time they worked over the years, all the holidays not taken, all the overtime not claimed, all the leave missed. They won the case.

One can imagine the negative psychological impact on other field types who worked for Landry. People who responded to the Chief's pep talks, who worked hard and did not look back, while Landry led them forward with dedication and a sense of purpose. They could withstand hardships because they all contributed to the effort.

After the settlement, when Landry and Swanson emerged whole, the other Case Officers were not amused and felt cheated. The years of hard work and sacrifices and deprivation were totally nullified. All the pep talks were revealed as merely con jobs. Don Courtney Email, 09/14/02. Courtney Email, 09/14/02.

Henthorn and others. Don was not a golfer, but a natural athlete, including being a champion wrestler. It became a popular watering hole. In addition to the club, a driving range and a grass putting green were built.

Don hired a female waitress/bartender called "Lightbulb," who did not speak English well. One morning several thirsty players entered the club after a round of golf. Don asked "Lightbulb" for a glass of ice water. She went out of the room, returned, and was puttering around behind the bar when Don asked for his ice water. She said, "*Right there.*" Not understanding what he said and embarrassed to ask again, she had brought a fly swatter.

Although I occasionally played golf with my Father and generally performed well, I never became a true golf enthusiast. However, I went to the Captains Club and putted on the green once. Even in the morning it was too hot for me. Scratch later gave me his old clubs after purchasing a new set, but they sat around the house gathering dust. ¹⁶

REVELATIONS

President Nixon's six-page statement released to the nation regarding the USG's role in, and the state of, Laos appeared to unleash a series of media articles pertaining to Laos and USG military participation. However, it raised as many questions as were answered. It also revealed glaring discrepancies and disinformation in regard to Nixon's statement, "*No American stationed in Laos had ever been killed in ground combat*

¹⁶ Mike Jarina Interviews.
EW Knight Emails, 11/02/00, 01/29/01.

operations." This error was soon outed as incorrect and a correction issued. ¹⁷

The Nixon Asian doctrine dictated that no ground combat would take place in any Asian country where USG was not already involved. An exception to this policy applied to Thailand, where USG was closely Allied and maintained agreements with the Thai government to thwart communist aggression in that country.

Many leading journalists and correspondents around the world contributed to public knowledge regarding the Indochina situation. Although "not giving away the store," some information was so detailed that it made one ponder the investigator's sources. This was particularly the case at the Royal Thai Air Base Udorn, Thailand, where more information was being generated regarding the base's multifaceted activities. The huge complex, headquarters for the U.S. 7/13 Air Force, an organization that directed all U.S. Airforce activities in Thailand was a focal point of the air war in Laos. The entity was answerable to the 7th Air Force Command at Tan Son Nhut Saigon, for operational matters, and 13th Air Force located at Clark Field, Luzon, Philippine Islands, for logistical support.

About 6,500 military men at the Udorn base supported thirty-six F4D Phantom bombers, RF4C reconnaissance planes, C-47 Spooky gunships, helicopter units, and a multitude of other types of specialized aircraft. The bombers currently flew both day and night combat support missions over Laos and escorted reconnaissance planes over North Vietnam.

Many organizations supported activities conducted at the sprawling base over the years. A majority were closely associated with the war in Laos. In addition to the USAF, Air

¹⁷ ARMA Captain Joe Bush had been killed during an attack at Moung Soui; still classified were the Americans killed at Phou Pha Thi.

America, CIA, facilities, a Thai T-28 squadron was based there. Moreover, a large Royal Thai Army regional camp existed on the southern perimeter of the air base.

Even before the USAF gravitated to the Udorn base in 1964, in the face of continued and overt communist aggression in Laos, and with Thai leaders concerned over the danger of Laos falling completely under the communist umbrella, it was employed by Air America's "civilian paramilitary" organization from the early 1960s in support of the Lao effort.

On the political front:

"The current lull in the [communist] offensive while the Lao communists propose peace talks has not relieved the anxiety in Bangkok. One top official there described it as a 'diplomatic offensive to go with the military offensive.'" ¹⁸

Since Thailand's border was contiguous with Laos, Thai leaders were constantly threatened by the current Vietnamese gains and desired a maximum U.S. air effort to quell the enemy dry-season offensive.

Another newspaper source provided information regarding the Lao situation:

"By limited application of their military superiority, the NVA and PL protégés hope to force political concessions from Prince Souvanna Phouma. The communists want him to reconstitute a tripartite rightist-neutralist-leftist government, stacked in their favor. Peace talks earlier this month by [titular PL leader] Prince Souphannouvong, pursue the same goal.

The government is weak from losses...Long Tieng is threatened and troop morale low.

Souvanna Phouma is entering negotiations on whether to negotiate for peace with few options open. He is facing a

¹⁸ In the Author's view, this statement best described the communist ploy of talking while fighting.

determined enemy. Air power is a plus and could be used as a bargaining chip. [However,] it is generally conceded that air power cannot be decisive in Laos. [The enemy was suffering heavy losses], but they continue to advance and supplies keep moving. Failing in a cease-fire or settlement, Laos is doomed to a continuation of the war.

The Lao know the U.S. is withdrawing from the Asian ground war... [and] see no way of winning."

Refugees displaced from the Plain of Jars area were not denied their "day in the sun" and discussed their grievances on the world stage with roving freelance reporters. Like any civilians subjected to war environments, they were dislocated and abused by both sides.

From an estimated 150,000 population in 1960, not many civilians remained on the high Plain, its ridges and valleys. During the past two years, few villages had escaped the bombing campaigns and, in many areas, people had to abandon their homes to survive. According to accounts from a refugee camp sixteen miles east of Vientiane where 900 people lived, when Allied bombing commenced on the southwest corner of the Plain of Jars at Mounq Kheung (LS-109), the PL schooled villagers to identify bombers, and the Vietnamese showed them how to dig foxholes, trenches, and bunker caves in the sides of the mountains for protection. In addition to suffering an onslaught from the air, sometimes villagers were forced to leave their villages to portage for the Pathet Lao and Vietnamese forces.

Vietnamese troops remained apart from the villagers and had allowed local Pathet Lao to govern for the previous two years. Vietnamese troops conducted the brunt of the fighting with the PL bringing up the rear.

The people could only farm the land under the cloak of darkness. Moreover, Pathet Lao overseers imposed a rice tax and

deposited the rice in a separate warehouse off-limits to the villagers.

With an increase in bombing, the enemy moved further away from populated areas. In some areas, the bombing also stimulated volunteers to join the communist ranks. "Better to die than to stay at home waiting for the planes to kill you..."

After being evacuated, some refugees complained that General Vang Pao had conscripted many of their remaining sons for his army...also, the flood plain was considered too hot and the lowland soil was substandard, and it failed to produce the same quantity of crops as those on the PDJ. Moreover, their Pathet Lao kip was worthless as the paper it was printed on.

In information derived from another camp, another article liberally included comments from refugees who had lived on the eastern Plain. Most of the people in the RLG camp were devoid of young men and women and consisted of very young children, mothers, or old individuals. Over time, Pathet Lao recruiters had conscripted their sons into the army, daughters were sent away for nurse's training courses, and school teachers were often sent to North Vietnam, where they were subjected to communist indoctrination.

Old folks spoke to the correspondent with bitter distaste of their communist masters and their abusive revolutionary methods. At first nothing appreciably changed when the Pathet Lao took control of the Plain of Jars from the RLA and the Kong Le neutralist faction in 1964, but villagers were not content living under rules of the new regime. Dissent further increased when they were forced to return to school. Under the Pathet Lao and communist system, social structure and individual roles were greatly altered and there was no logical explanation for the changes. Besides being forced to part with their children, the

poor were obliged to support the maintenance of teachers, agricultural advisors, and health officials.

These factors forced the old people to assume the burden of supporting the new society. They were subsequently relegated to menial jobs like babysitting or tending buffalo in the fields. Authorities confiscated fifteen percent of the rice crop and constantly demanded additional production in support of the nation. No North Vietnamese soldiers were in evidence, but occasionally Vietnamese officials arrived at their school.

Despite the broad spectrum of complaints, most people were happy to be out of the immediate war zones and professed a preference for the RLG. However, they were not entirely satisfied, for they were not familiar with the new area, their Pl kip was worthless, and there was no way to earn money. Moreover, they fondly recalled the positive aspects of their former homes, the fields, and the village surrounded by a cooling stream and shady fruit trees. ¹⁹

UPCOUNTRY

Tension mounted among individuals at both Sam Tong and Long Tieng complexes. Largely unimpeded by Allied air, under the cover of dense smoke and haze caused by the hill tribe natives' annual slash and burn activity, enemy units moved closer to

¹⁹ Segment Sources:

Washington Sunday Star, Mary McGrory, Laos and Another Fiasco, 03/15/70.

Washington Sunday Star, Henry S. Bradsher, Udorn Air Base in Thailand U.S. Mainstay in Laos Fight, 03/15/70.

Christian Science Monitor, Southerland, From a Refugee Camp Forty Miles East of Vientiane, 03/14/70.

Manchester Guardian, Ian Wright, Article Regarding Lao Refugee Insight, 03/14/70.

New York Times, Kamm, on Politics.

Stern, *Washington Post*, 03/26/70.

EW Knight Email, 10/26/70.

Sites-20 and 20A. As fires burned at night outlining surrounding ridgelines, mixed defenders managed to hold the heights of Phou Pha Sai to the east of Site-20A, and at Ban Na, north of Sam Tong. However, there was too much inhospitable territory to control, and it was impossible to successfully plug all the passes defining the "backdoor from the Plain of Jars," which allowed enemy units to infiltrate along trails through the old Catholic-administered leper village at Ban Hin Tang, and to ascend Hill 1900 at Phou Long Mat and other elevated mountains north of the Tha Tam Bleung Valley (LS-72). It appeared "the balloon was about to go up."²⁰

Although not readily discernible, everyone was aware that the enemy was inching closer to our bases. For about three weeks considerable consternation existed at Sam Tong among both natives and American workers relating to if and when they would be struck. The main concern was sapper teams infiltrating at night and causing havoc. Unlike the Air America hostel, AID houses had all been constructed off the ground for improved air circulation, and the void underneath could allow easier destruction by satchel charges.

At night, designated Americans patrolled the hostel and AID quarters. Every evening Pop Buell's assistant, Blaine Jensen, met with local military guards and told them where they would be patrolling. As a result of this requirement, little sleep was accomplished, but the men were still obliged to work throughout the day.

Everyone was on edge. During the first week in March, Jensen instructed all Americans who were not performing guard

²⁰ Balloon go up: A term for military action made popular during the First World War. The appearance of a hot-air observation balloon generally preceded a heavy artillery barrage followed by an infantry attack.

duty to remain in their houses at night, for the guards were instructed to shoot anything moving: first challenge, then shoot low.

Dick French, the ARMA Requirements Office (RO) officer, who formerly worked at Moung Soui and other Neutralist enclaves, was assigned to Site-20 after the fall of L-108. Something went bump in the night. Thinking he heard a noise outside, and disregarding Jensen's orders, French ventured outside to peer under the house. Observed by a Meo guard, he failed to respond to the challenge and was shot at close range, shattering bones in both legs. The Requirements Office (RO) crowd thirsted for revenge. However, Jensen took the brunt of criticism and stopped anyone, including Vang Pao, from punishing the guard, who was only fulfilling his orders. For his part, French knew he was wrong and harbored no animosity toward the guard.

The significance of the incident was evidenced in the rapid deterioration of both American staff and pilot morale.

The previous year, Pop and Blaine had been attempting to inform people that enemy intentions were to seize Sam Tong. They were laughed at, particularly from those stationed at Long Tieng. However, their rationale was based on the 1961 theoretical ceasefire and demarcation line delineating areas belonging to each side, and on the 1962 Geneva Accords on Laos. Sam Tong was located in a grey area. The refugee site housed the RLG's official civilian offices and the area Chao Khouang leaders and staffs for both Xieng Khouang Ville and Sam Neua provinces close to the line. Long Tieng lay inside the Rightist side; Padong was within Pathet Lao boundaries.

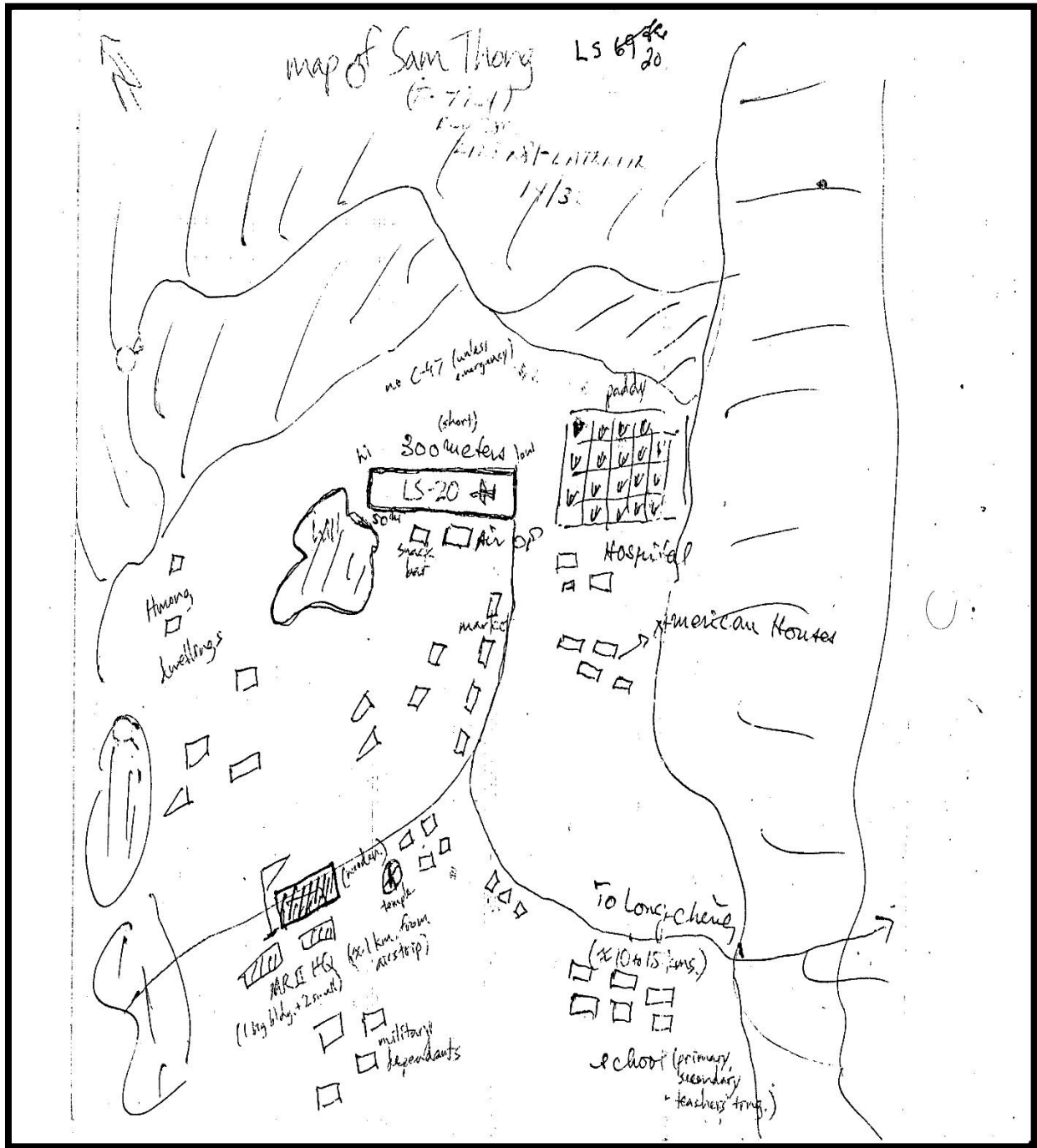
Pop and Blaine were thoroughly convinced that Sam Tong would fall, and a fallback site for refugees and AID infrastructure was required. Therefore, the two expended considerable energy preparing a paper justifying construction of

a secondary pullback site in case it was needed. This conclusion was submitted to appropriate superiors in Vientiane. Therefore, toward the end of 1969, funds were allocated to begin improving the Ban Xon (Son will be used) (LS-272) airstrip to the south. This proved a wise move and helped accommodate some of the thousands of souls evacuated earlier from the Plain of Jars. As the situation worsened on the Plain of Jars, AID-sponsored construction teams continued to improve Site-272. A warehouse and hospital were erected and a Porta-Camp trailer borrowed from Long Tieng to act as an USAID office if needed.

At the Long Tieng base, people were anticipating an attack on Sam Tong. Enemy had been detected around Vang Pao's farm in the low ground just north of Skyline, and were thought to be moving up the valley from the east. People reacted in different ways. At night Mike Jarina's Filipino Flight Mechanic was very nervous and asked if he could sleep in the same room with Mike. Unconcerned, the poker players stayed up all night gaming. Fixed wing Porter pilot Bill McShane occupied his time dismantling and cleaning his weapon. Causing Jarina to wonder what was happening, a Filipino Flight Mechanic asked Mike if he wanted any hand grenades. Someone else interjected that if the enemy hit the base they were in for a big surprise.

Earlier in the day, while the subject of an enemy incursion was being discussed, Mike overheard a young Customer say, *"You bunch of civilians, you probably would shoot each other. You don't know beans about war."*

Taking great umbrage at the man's statement, Jarina angrily hissed, *"You silly ass, I don't know if you served a day in the military yourself, but ninety-five percent of these pilots flying here are seasoned military pilots. They were at least a captain in the U.S. Marine Corps or Air Force, or higher, or retired. They probably know more about tactics, fighting, and*



A rough indigenous rendering of LS-20. The Air America hostel was sited close to the karst west of the airstrip. Meo (Hmong) housing was separated from the FAR military quarters at the bottom left.

Author Collection.



Early Ban Son (LS-272) USAID refugee site established as a fallback position to accommodate the thousands of people anticipated to be dislocated by the accelerated fighting in MR-2. When completed, the dirt road beside the complex wound fifty-eight miles north from Vientiane to Site-272 and eighteen miles over mountains and streams to Long Tieng. In favorable weather, supplies could be trucked to Ban Son. Hillside scars are the result of the wasteful slash and burn agricultural methods employed by hill tribe farmers.



Later view of Ban Son after the strip was extended and refugee housing better organized.

1970 *Air America LOG*, Volume 4, Number 3, Page 10.



A view of Site-272 strip from the control tower. Next to the Jeep in the foreground is an expandable Porta-Camp building for administrative work.

1973 *Air America Log*, Volume 7, #5.

shooting than you will probably know in your entire life." That terminated the discussion. ²¹

I deadheaded on Hotel-44 to The Alternate on dreaded Friday, the thirteenth. After assuming control of Papa Foxtrot Gulf (PFG) with Flight Mechanic Daniels, I conducted air operations-sanctioned local missions for just short of six hours. Like a dark cloud descending over the valley, it was impossible not to note a heightened sense of foreboding at Long Tieng. Since the complex had already been infiltrated by enemy sappers, sleep was difficult to obtain at the overflowing hostel. Therefore, to alleviate crowding and improved safety, when available, some of us stayed overnight in the two-story Customer quarters on the hill. In the event of trouble at night, we were advised to repair to a natural open bunker behind the facilities. Actually, the spot was little more than a shallow four-to five-foot pit that was weather etched into the limestone karst. It appeared to potentially afford some protection from grazing fire, but not from grenades or indirect mortar fire. While eating and watching old movies, the time on the hill did allow more face-to-face interaction with Customers and Raven pilots still remaining at night.

Saturday involved a full day supplying pads on the Vang Pao defensive line. In addition to conducting thirty-five landings, I also logged one-hour of actual instruments (AI) because of restricted visibility. Although it really was not legal to log AI without accredited navigation equipment and the accompanying instrument flying rules, many of us did it anyway. It was a personal thing.

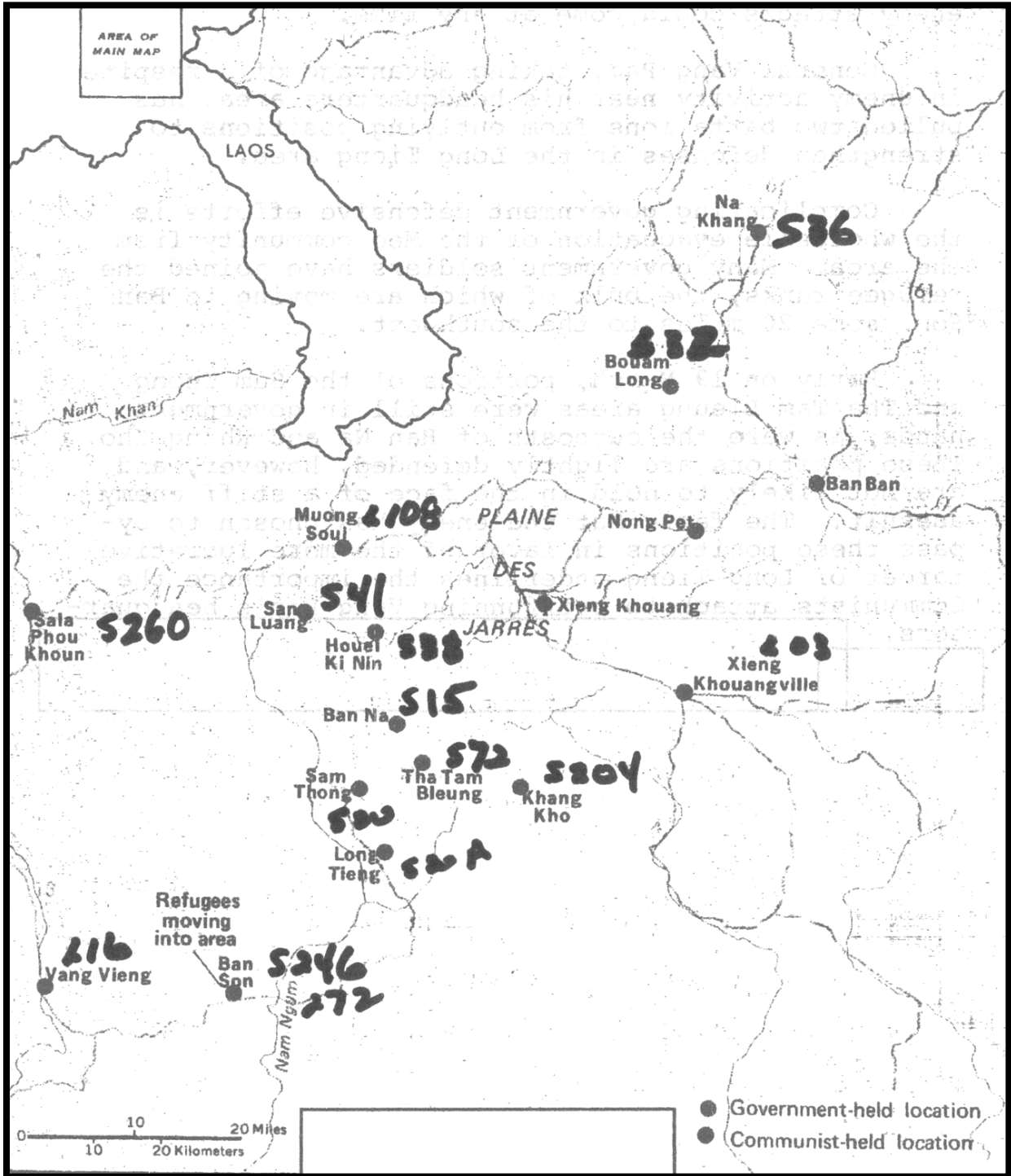
²¹ Blaine Jensen Letters.
Mike Jarina Interviews/
Joe Flipse Email.

Full of good intentions, but with limited manpower, the Vang Pao line was intended to provide a defense in depth on hills from west to east and north to south. As enemy attacks would likely come from the north and east, most emphasis was accorded to developing these locations. Starting with Skyline, as each pad with its adjacent circular earthen fort came into existence, definitive cloth signal panels and radio communication codes were assigned for ease of identification. For example, positions on Skyline were designated Charlie pads; those around Sam Tong Delta pads. These were all still considered relatively safe to work. Others further afield were suitably lettered and required more caution.

Since maintenance was due on my machine, I flew Papa Foxtrot Gulf for six hours and then switched aircraft, finishing the day in Papa Foxtrot Juliet (PFJ).

The following day involved a great deal of refugee evacuation work. Phil Goddard, Mike Jarina, and Tod Yourgliche arrived from Udorn in 12F. Completing thirty-one landings, they shuttled people from Ban Na and the Site-72 area to the Sam Tong school yard.

After a few local trips, I was dispatched to Site-20 to assist other helicopter crews with evacuations. Crossing Skyline, I radioed Mike Jarina saying that I had been sent to help. I wanted to know what was going on and where the people were being dropped. Although Mike indicated in the school yard, looking down from overhead the complex, no one appeared to be in that area. After I reported this, Mike came back saying, *"Impossible, we have been shuttling hundreds there all morning."* Then, looking westward, lines of people were seen walking along the roads and trails. Therefore, the succeeding loads were delivered to the road.



03/19/70 CIA graphic showing major sites evacuated or reinforced in the vicinity of the Long Tieng-Sam Tong complexes during a time of enemy pressure and attacks. Ban Son several miles to the south was the locus of refuge for people streaming out of the area.

That night at last light, fearing what was soon going to happen, villagers began moving west out of Long Tieng. With the exodus, and knowing the natives' movement was a harbinger of future events, we knew the ax would shortly fall.

Since Jarina was slated to have a proficiency check in a Bell 205 with Goddard the following day, I switched helicopters to a Bell 204. Daniels remained with Juliet and Yourgliche with 12F.

With the enemy bypassing outlying strong points and rapidly converging on fortress Long Tieng, Vang Pao redeployed his assets closer to the home base perimeter.

Conducting thirty landings on the sixteenth, the crew of Papa Foxtrot Juliet began moving refugees and reinforcing the western flank at Than Heup (LS-238), a site located on the south side of the Nam Ngum between San Luang and Nam Pit, which had previously been developed to plug the gap leading to Ban Na. They also picked up ADC troops at Na Pong (LS-78), a few miles west of Xieng Dat, and delivered them to Ban Na for defensive purposes. Afternoon flights involved fortifying eastern flanks in the Padong area. This required rotating men and munitions from Pha Phai (LS-65) to Khang Kho (LS-204) and to Tha Tam Bleung (LS-72). Like all Bell crews, they RON at The Alternate.

The enemy continued probing our defenses for weakness. During my first flight in the morning, I was dispatched with a load of ammunition to a Charlie pad adjacent to the road junction leading over Skyline Ridge from Sam Tong into the Long Tieng valley. After landing, the troops seemed unduly animated, pointing to the hill's forward lip where two bodies were barely visible. In the early hours, dressed only in loin cloths, clutching grenades in each hand, the men had ascended the northern slope. Assailed by volumes of ground fire, they met their deaths. Although their effort seemed like a suicide

mission, one had to admire their outstanding courage. It gave me pause to wonder at the nature of such people, and how we could ever defeat such a motivated enemy. Upon return to the loading area, I related what I had seen to a Customer, who speculated that the men were likely FAR, who had deserted or been captured at Nam Bac during the early 1968 defeat. It was unknown if the men had volunteered or were forced to participate in the suicide assignment.

Tod and I participated in working similar areas as the crew of PFJ.

The declining military situation around Site-20 caused much consternation and introspection in Vientiane, particularly the disposition of Sam Tong hospital patients. Pop and Blaine were well aware that panic would ensue when a total move to Ban Son commenced. During the evening, Doctor Charles Weldon called Site-20. Jiggs had just returned from consulting the ambassador. A decision had been made authorizing commencement of a movement of all patients, doctors, nurses, and medics to the Ban Son hospital at first light.

SIERRA HITS THE FAN

"North Vietnamese troops have pushed to within one mile of the airstrip despite the deployment of new government troops into the hills immediately north of the base. Vang Pao now has some 800 troops dug in around the headquarters complex, but with enemy units closing in, there is a real danger of the government losing its use of the airstrip.

In an attempt to block further enemy troops movement into the northern approaches to Long Tieng, Vang Pao is reinforcing

positions immediately south of the heavily contested Tha Tam Bleung area." ²²

Early Thursday morning planes arrived at Sam Tong and the evacuation began in earnest. As predicted, evacuation of the hospital created general panic, particularly among Lao soldiers whose families still resided in the bowl, the Lao shop keepers, and persons who conducted market business. During the morning, in addition to removing occupants from the hospital, attempts were made by AID personnel to evacuate the elderly, the pregnant, little children, and those not able to walk. ²³

Beginning at noon, chaos continued in the Sam Tong bowl, with people screaming and pleading for air evacuation, or, despairing of this option, leaving the area on foot. With discipline and control lost, Jensen was threatened, assaulted, and even had loaded guns pointed in his face.

Toward evening, the embassy ordered all Americans to leave Site-20. After Pop and Blaine oversaw their evacuation, with no one remaining to help control the movement, they instructed all pilots to stop landing. Feeling an obligation to the people, the two men intended to remain and walk out with the remaining villagers. Furthermore, they planned to overnight with the Meo Nai Kongs on the Sam Tong periphery, and not in the American facilities.

At dusk Blaine Jensen was about to make a final radio sign-off to the Vientiane radio operator before departing for the weeds with Meo counterparts when a Bell pilot landed with a note

²² CIA Bulletin, Laos.

²³ The USAID move to Site-272 was accomplished with a minimum of hassle. Pre-planned, within twenty-four hours the hospital staff had the new facility up and running. In addition to those patients transferred from Sam Tong, by 21 March a total of 610 individuals were receiving medical treatment there. It was noted that many civilians had incurred injuries from land mines, a problem that persisted throughout the war.



Following the January 1970 evacuation at Mung Soui, refugee movements into Ban Son became commonplace.

1970 *Air America Log*, Volume 4, #3, p 10.

for Pop Buell. It contained explicit instructions for the men to immediately evacuate. Disgusted, Blaine turned the high frequency (HF) single side band radio off and boarded the Huey for Long Tieng, where a Porter pilot waited impatiently to ferry them to Vientiane. The departure marked the only time Jensen had departed from The Alternate by plane when it was too dark to see anything. Immersed in smoke and darkness, the CASI pilot conducted very tight turns within the bowl to gain altitude and clear the hills before turning south. Somewhat nervous, Blaine wished he was back on the ground at Sam Tong.

With the stress and strain of the day's exhausting evacuation process at its zenith, Pop, Blaine, and the AID staff left Site-20 without their belongings--nothing but the clothes on their backs.

The crew of Papa Foxtrot Juliet departed The Alternate to work Bouam Long. En route, they stopped at Sam Tong to obtain a sack of sandwiches. Previously, Jarina had been purchasing Meo flintlock rifles which Thong Sar, former assistant hostel manager at Sam Tong, had been procuring for him. Wanting a better conversation piece, he had talked Tongsar into having the local silversmith replace the aluminum bands holding the guns together with silver strips. The guns had been ready for some time and Tongsar indicated that because of the current tenuous situation, Mike should take the artifacts.²⁴ However, Goddard was in a hurry to leave and there was no room in the Bell, so Mike said they would return later and retrieve them.

²⁴ Tongsar Boupoua died on 6 April 1971 after falling out of a tree in Vientiane. He had climbed the tree to retrieve a cat for his son. At the time of his death, Tongsar was assistant to the Air America Station Manager at LS-20A. Air America XOXO, 04/06/71, Jerry Connor. AID representative Mac Thompson indicated that USAID was going to hire Tongsar as their main liaison man with the Minister of Social Welfare in Vientiane. Mac Thompson Email.

Their first destination was San Pa Ka (LS-33), north of the Phu Cum area. Visibility was so impaired in thick smoke and haze that Mike descended to get his bearings. Curious, Phil inquired what he was doing. Mike indicated that he was conducting a landmark check to confirm his position. Goddard asked, "*What if someone shoots at you?*" Answering the question logically, Mike replied that he would climb back to altitude.

Jarina was still being evaluated by the ACPH prior to being released on his own. Over the course of the transition to the Bell, Mike judged the machine quite unstable in adverse winds compared to the heavier H-34. Moreover, he was used to H-34 techniques, whereby the pilot could ride the wind updrafts to the pad and set down. He encountered problems in and around the Site-32 area. At one local landing zone the wind was particularly difficult to judge. Unpredictable winds were ascending both sides of the hill and shifting at will. Finding it especially challenging to land, he indicated that if flying by himself, he would not attempt a landing. It was too dangerous. Assenting to Jarina's decision, Phil recommended that Mike choose another pad. Finally satisfied with Mike's performance, he said, "*Let's go home.*" Then Goddard assumed control of the aircraft, climbed to 10,000, and headed south using the non-directional beacon (NDB) on Skyline for navigation.²⁵

After arriving at Alternate, Mike boarded C-123 671 bound for Udorn.

Tuesday morning commenced on a gloomy note. No one with any time working upcountry could recall such copious, dense smoke

²⁵ The control transfer could be accomplished over ICS, or by the time-honored method of the PIC shaking the cyclic control and saying, "I have it."

hanging in the bowl. As a result, the reduced visibility initially stalled air strikes and even local helicopter operations.

For security, the Raven pilots RON at Vientiane. As Raven FAC commanding officer, Major Blake, noted in his journal:

"All FAC aircraft airborne on schedule today, but haze and smoke in the morning, then heavy cumulus in the afternoon forced diversion of twenty-seven USAF sorties. Best results came from a strike at Red Dog's position eight kilometers [4.9 miles] northeast of Alternate, where we have four 105mm howitzers. From coordinates supplied by [FAG] Red Dog, eight F-4s achieved six secondary explosions and fires."

Later, three Meo T-28 pilots managed to launch for points unknown. *"They flew six short sorties apiece, with no verifiable BDA."*

Blake went on to comment about flying conditions at The Alternate:

"...I could barely see the runway when I flew over the valley this morning, just clearing the ridgelines. Came up by way of Sam Thong, and then homed in on the TACAN until I almost hit the south ridge. There seems to be fires all over...and the smoke layer tops out at more than 12,000 feet..."

Could barely see the other end of the runway on touchdown..."

When we commenced flying, everyone recognized there was an increased danger of mid-air collisions. For this reason, most of us English speakers radioed taking off, landing, and at various gaps in and out of the valley. To maintain further clearance from unseen landing traffic, I attempted to fly close to the north side of the runway and carefully air taxi to the parking/loading area.

ANOTHER MOMENT OF TRUTH

After supporting numerous local pads with twenty-nine landings, believing my day was finished, I landed on the parking ramp anticipating a cold beer, a hot meal, and a fairly good night's sleep. This pleasant scenario was soon squashed when Goddard hurriedly approached my ship with news that a Customer had another mission for us to pick up an undisclosed number of wounded at Site-72. Due to the lateness of the day, it was a hurry up mission, no time to double crew, no escort aircraft; perhaps neither were considered necessary. I assumed that Phil had been briefed, but except for working the surrounding hills, I had not landed in the valley for some time and was not aware of the current situation. The request for helicopters must have been radioed in from the field, but all I really knew was that there was supposed to be wounded at the strip; if so, I suspected the enemy must be in close proximity to the friendlies.²⁶ As with other questionable missions over the years, we would have to fly to the area, take a close look, and establish our own analysis as to the danger and feasibility of attempting the task.

The Tha Tam Bleung area was located only nine miles northeast of the Alternate. High mountains intervened between the sites, necessitating climbing to sufficient altitude to clear the highest point. Within a short time, we approached the relatively narrow 4,500-foot ASL (above sea level) valley, pinched in and bracketed by high north and south ridges. To conserve fuel, observe, and provide cover, Goddard landed on the forward lip of the southern ridgeline. I continued

²⁶ Friendlies: A word not grammatically correct, but a term we used at the time to describe the forces we supported as opposed to "the bad guys."

perpendicularly over the east-west strip, commenced a tight left turn, and rolled out to conduct a high recon of the small, circular earthen fort located on the western upslope portion of the runway. Terrain on both sides of the thousand-foot dirt strip fell away gently into densely wooded ravines and rolling mini-hills, liberally wrapped in closely packed jungle foliage. This tangled mess was much more pronounced on the north side, making it virtually impossible to identify potential trouble.

My abbreviated orbit revealed no visible action occurring anywhere in the area, but something still seemed wrong. While rapidly descending and establishing an appropriate heading up strip, I continued west toward the fort. While approaching the objective, I clearly observed several men standing on bunkers or the berms of trenches inside the wire perimeter. Except for wearing non-regulation-non-military loin cloths, they were naked. Since our guys did not dress in this manner, the sighting was very curious. Recalling my nasty episode with the symmetrical gray rocks south of Na Khang during a flawed operation during May 1966, when H-34 Captain Bill Wilmot was killed, it triggered considerable caution in my mind. Granted, the day was beastly hot and the men could have been Lao Theung types who wore similar attire in their native environment. However, the abbreviated clothing was also worn by Dac Cong soldiers for ease of clandestine maneuvering and minimal detection. Adding to my increasing suspicion and discomfort regarding the mission, a few other individuals were sprawled on the ground outside the wire. None were moving or appeared wounded; obviously something was drastically wrong.

With only seconds to allow a final decision-whether to land or abort-I informed Tod, whom I considered a courageous person and excellent gunner, that the situation just did not look right, and to prepare for any eventuality. Then, just as I

finished talking, one or two men began waving their arms and energetically jumping up and down. Obviously, they were attempting to communicate something to me...either to land or to wave off. Whether friend or foe, I chose the latter option.

I immediately commenced a tight 180-degree right hand turn over the strip and began a high-power climb to attain a "safe" altitude before heading south for the short trip to Long Tieng. Even empty and low on fuel, the slow climb seemed to consume an eternity.

It appeared that my "sixth sense," triggered by several visual cues and years of combat experience, had proved reliable once again. Suddenly loud and heavy shooting commenced, seemingly from all quarters. It was impossible to judge an accurate direction of fire, but this was academic. I assumed the shooting was directed at me from terrain surrounding the strip, adjacent areas that afforded superior cover and concealment. The stark reality of my immediate situation was that enemy gunners had me in their sights. Moreover, I was taking hits, and had to get the hell out of that hornet's nest before such an option was no longer feasible.

Abandoning any further quest to ascend, I turned south toward Goddard's location and we both headed back to Site-20A.

There was still a little daylight remaining when I landed and parked on the lower ramp adjacent to the karst. After a hasty investigation, Tod considered most battle damage superficial, but there was evidence of a more serious problem about midway down the upper tail boom. When Tod removed the Zeus keys securing the fairing, two large holes, both entry and exit, were revealed bored perfectly through the center of the tail rotor blade drive shaft. It looked like .30 caliber damage, but could have been something larger. The diameter of the driveshaft was quite large, capable of sustaining substantial battle

damage, but who really knew how long any damaged part rotating at high speed would actually last before failing? With all the small arms fire directed at us, I was surprised that the aircraft had not received additional critical or crippling damage. At any rate, we were temporarily out of the flying business. The Bell would be grounded (AGP) until another shaft was delivered and installed. Depending on how one evaluated the situation, it appeared from the episode that day and past experiences at Site-72, that the focus of my nemesis centered on that cursed valley. Perhaps it was just coincidence, but I was not convinced. Time would tell.

Because of the deteriorating situation close to our perimeter, and heightened reports of a nighttime threat from sapper penetration, all crews were advised to RON on SKY hill. If the situation was considered so dire, it gave one pause to wonder why irreplaceable Air America crews even remained at the site with irreplaceable machines. It did not make sense. Sam Tong had been almost totally evacuated, and Vang Pao and his officers' families had departed the Long Tieng valley for the safety of Vientiane. Why were we still there? Clearly someone in our management hierarchy, or at AB-1, failed to appreciate the potential losses to the helicopter program from a serious enemy attack.

With many Customers "away" on R&R, vacation, or divorced from harm's way, there were several empty rooms available. One downside to RON at the SKY compound was that because of the longer walking distance uphill, as opposed to the shorter walk to the hostel we did not lug our heavy weapons with us.

Positive that I would not fly until late the following morning, for the first time upcountry, I became gloriously smashed in the Customer bar to celebrate my good fortune in once again cheating death. After laughing, joking, and feeding Ralph

the bear, a lush in his own right, his daily ration of beer, I departed and fell into bed in a sodden state thinking that all was well until morning.

Sometime during the night, through an alcoholic miasma, I sensed a loud commotion, with people running along the porch and noisily banging on doors. With a dry mouth and still quite woozy, I was not inclined to arise and investigate, so I drifted back to sleep. A few minutes later there was even more intense banging on doors, while someone--perhaps a reincarnated Paul Revere--shouted "the enemy was coming, the enemy was coming" and to repair to the fallback bunker behind the quarters. Then it became quiet. I was again tempted to return to sleep, but now mostly awake, elected to investigate the invasion of my slumber.

By the time I finished dressing and stepped outside into the cool, damp air of the pitch-black early morning, it was quiet, and not a soul was in sight. The silence was deafening. The situation was such that whatever effects the beer had on my body now rapidly dissipated and I was thinking clearly, and nearly myself again. After my eyes adjusted to the inky darkness, with only stars to lead the way, I picked my way down the narrow path behind the buildings toward the bunker. I met Chuck Campbell on the trail. He had just come from the radio room after trying to apprise the Vientiane or Udorn duty officer of the current situation. Apparently, after circling Vang Pao's porous western defenses and Skyline, a small number of enemy soldiers had been sighted along the Nam Ngum, or west of the gap leading into the valley.

I followed Chuck to the bunker, where a number of disgruntled, silent, and sullen crew members--Peyton, Goddard, Fillipi, Knotts, and their Flight Mechanics--were huddled in a semicircle against the perimeter of the sand-bagged bunker, a



Looking southeast from the SKY compound road toward the Long Tieng valley from the Customer (SKY) compound located at the west end of the valley.

Author Collection.



Customer in front of Ralph, the Asian honey bear's cage. Customer bar is located behind the cage. Southern ridgeline is seen at the top of the photo.

Unknown Source.

place no one ever thought we would ever actually use. Consisting of a natural sink hole in the karst, the hollow had been well chosen.

The redoubt was located high above the road leading into the valley from the west, but apparently provided no overhead cover from indirect fire or means of escape except in the direction of the Customer quarters, certainly an obvious target for invading forces. However, if considered necessary, some of the more knowledgeable pilots had been speculating about climbing down the back of the bunker and making their way to the swinging bridge across the Nam Ngum. I had never heard of this backdoor route, and doubted the viability of negotiating it in the dark, or anytime for tenderfoots. Then I noticed that not a single person held a weapon--nothing to fight with should we become challenged. What did these guys think that this was, a picnic? The group was not amused by my banter and a disgusted individual meekly grumbled, *"Sit down and shut up, Casterlin."* Being a school trained Marine, their apathy baffled and appalled me. Therefore, I informed Chuck that I was returning to the quarters to find something with which to protect ourselves. As a former Marine Corps sergeant with Nam experience, Campbell clearly understood my viewpoint: no good Marine ever willingly goes down without a fight. Therefore, he agreed to accompany me and we eventually discovered a case of hand grenades. Although we found no other arms with which to fight, the grenades were considered better than nothing, so we jointly hauled the case back to the hole and assumed a position with the rest of the miserable individuals.

Time passed slowly amid the demons of the night adding to our discomfiture. Like a captive audience, we remained trapped in that depressing, damp hole, apprehensive, watching, listening, and anticipating an attack. Moreover, we had to



West end of the Long Tieng valley complex looking north across the hilltop Sky headquarters/billeting, dining, recreation area. The small karst to the immediate south contained the bunker where Air America crews repaired during the early morning hours of 18 March 1970 after reports of sappers infiltrating from the west were received.

Author Collection.

contend with the damp and bone-chilling cold. Fighting off fatigue, and apprehension of an assault without adequate defense measures, was unnerving. Just before the advent of false dawn, a time I recalled that night air became the coldest during a perimeter defense field exercise in the boondocks of the vast Quantico reservation, the alert was cancelled. Vang Pao's people had dealt with whatever the threat entailed.

Gratefully, we trudged back to our individual rooms and attempted to sleep.

It seemed I was asleep for only a few minutes when Goddard tromped down the porch deck pounding on the doors, announcing all hands had to fly. Sam Tong had been hit during the night and there were many dead and wounded to retrieve. Deadheading from Udorn, Mike Jarina arrived in Papa Foxtrot Hotel with Charlie Weitz. They conducted nineteen landings and returned to Tango-08 for the night.

Still hung over and breathing noxious fumes, I joined Jack Knotts, flying from the left seat in 96W, mostly as an observer to mount the first flight of the day to Sam Tong. Then I joined Nikki Fillipi in Papa Foxtrot Juliet. We initially were accompanied by T-28 pilots from Vientiane, who dropped their ordnance on suspected enemy troops in the area. Buildings located just off the strip were burning as we retrieved people from karsts bordering the southern perimeter of the complex.

When my machine was repaired and I was sufficiently satisfied with its airworthiness, I returned to the task at hand, that of shuttling Meo troops from Ban Na to areas around Sam Tong, and others onto the expansive Skyline ridge. It became an exercise in musical mountains, as Vang Pao was attempting to perform the impossible with only a few troops.

Horrible flying conditions prevailed, curtailing visible air strikes. Some electronic bombing was conducted on suspected

enemy locations, but accurate bomb damage assessment (BDA) could not be obtained. Consequently, few friendly aircraft were available for accurate targeting other than T-28s. Except for people arriving from Sam Tong, Long Tieng was fast becoming a ghost town with many soldiers abandoning the field to accompany family members moving south to Ban Son. Pessimism was rife. Since the enemy was expected to push on The Alternate that night, ordered out of the valley by the ambassador and AB-1, the Customer and other Americans reassigned to Sam Tong or stationed there began destroying critical documents. Leaving only two Case Officers to monitor the situation, Vang Pao departed for Vientiane to continue his requests to the General Staff to allocate additional troops from other MRs for defense.

Flying troops between Ban Na and Sam Tong, I logged forty landings and eight Special Missions that day, before returning to Udorn. Someone finally realized the tangible danger to crews and machines, and until the situation was resolved, we were no longer authorized to RON at The Alternate.

THE THAI EQUATION

A need was recognized for special units of volunteer Asian soldiers, who could be introduced and utilized in a military situation and not unduly jeopardize world opinion. In January the Royal Thai Government (RTG), U.S. military, and CIA agreed to jointly support and fund formation of 550-man volunteer irregular battalions for use in Cambodia. Volunteer troops were not unheard of in Southeast Asia, for China had referred to their soldiers in Korea by that name.

Referred to as Battalion Commandos (BC), the units were staffed by fifty Royal Thai Army (RTA) officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs). Initially specifying volunteers of

Cambodian derivation, recruiting commenced at Royal Thai Army (RTA) bases in the Bangkok area and Isan in the northeast. The first two battalions began training at various camps under the direction of U.S. Special Forces teams, but were not ready to be deployed.

The afternoon before I departed for Tango-08, SR-9 (Strategic Reserve-9) several hundred-man regular Thai army artillery, with their 155mm howitzers and an infantry support unit, began arriving in C-130 planes from Lopburi, Thailand (Kokethiem), located sixty miles north of Bangkok. Aware that their mission was to slow or halt the enemy advance, they hastily established a reinforced 155mm artillery firebase (Apollo) near the King's villa on the southern ridge above the valley floor. Since dirt roads were already built to the area, ammunition was trucked to the site from the unloading ramp in the valley. One consideration of the Thai introduction was the question of political and military consequences of the Thai involvement should the enemy manage to overrun Long Tieng.

However, because the Lao problem had the potential for greatly affecting neighboring Thailand, this latest move certainly did not constitute a precedent for the Royal Thai Government (RTG) or the RTA. Very early in the Indochina War, when the border at Nakhon Phanom was threatened, Thai artillery had fired rounds across the Mekong to ward off Vietnamese inroads at Thakhet. Defensive Thai artillery had previously been established east of Moung Soui at Ban Khay, and the loss of Long Tieng was viewed by government leaders as far more crippling politically to the Lao Prime Minister and Lao war effort than doing nothing. Moreover, in addition to the support bases in Thailand, the Thai in many different aspects had been an integral part of the Meo program from the beginning of their wholesale participation. Special PARU police units under the

overall supervision and direction of AB-1's Bill Lair, Colonel Parnet, and Headquarters 333 General DHEP, (Vitoon) had organized, trained, and advised Meo soldiers in the camps at Padong, Phu Khao, Long Tieng, and other field sites. PARU also served as radio intercept specialists at far flung locations. The courageous warriors even fought and died alongside the locals at remote outposts. RTA artillery specialists first manned the Meo 75mm pack howitzers, and then taught the Meo how to use them. From the beginning, Thai aviators had participated in the Lao war, first flying T-6 planes at the behest of the Eisenhower Administration, and then T-28s for the RLAF in support of RLA ground forces. There were even experiments using RTA types as early road watch teams. Some English-speaking FAG controllers were Thai civilians tasked to coordinate nighttime A-26 air strikes along enemy LOCs in upper Military Region Two. Of course, there was always a need for interpreters, and many other instances where Thai military or civilians were employed by the many agencies in Laos. Contractors liberally employed Thai workers to construct air strips, roads, and erect houses and buildings in the country.

Yes, the Thai government and their citizens were always deeply embedded and involved in the Lao war, and would only increase participation as the military situation in Military Region Two worsened.

Based on the advice of his Country Team and pressure from Souvanna Phouma, in addition to the SR-9 unit inserted to the battlefield, Ambassador Godley requested introduction of the Thai regular Army 13th Regimental Combat Team (RCT). He telegraphed his Washington superiors from Vientiane:

"...fresh troops on the ground, if introduced quickly enough, might still salvage situation-even undermanned, underequipped Thai units, which by comparison to those available

to RLG look great, can make significant psychological as well as military contribution to the defense of Long Tieng."

WASHINGTON 10:08 AM

During the first of two WSAG meetings on the 19th a CIA representative informed the group that in addition to SR-9, three special guerrilla units (SGU) units from southern Laos were being flown to The Alternate as reinforcements, and that control of the airstrip was necessary as an effective defense. The Vietnamese were moving, but did not have sufficient strength to overwhelm the site. It was believed that if Vang Pao's forces could hold for two days, then, with the reinforcements, the general could regroup and present a strong defense, especially if the weather improved, allowing close air support...

There was marked pessimism regarding Long Tieng's survival. North Vietnamese leaders' keen interest in capturing The Alternate was to retaliate for Vang Pao's month's long Plain of Jars operation. It was believed that the enemy would not continue further south of Long Tieng, and would concentrate on consolidating their hold on the Plain. The issue of Vang Pao's actions concluded that as long as he was supported by USG and the Prime Minister, he would keep fighting as he withdrew.

During an afternoon meeting, the subject of B-52 strikes was explored. Apparently two areas of enemy concentration were identified both north and east of Sites-20 and 20A. Despite the foul weather, SAM and AAA targets had been selected for either tactical air or B-52 strikes on both sides of the Barthelemy Pass border should fair weather prevail. Attacks on the politically sensitive Sam Neua Town were discussed.

The introduction of C130 gunships diverted from southern Laos was considered helpful.

The discussion turned to the viability of dispatching a Thai RCT to Long Tieng, but no consensus was reached.

Before adjourning, a synopsis was prepared and sent to President Nixon; a list of several to do items was proposed:

...the use of C-130 gunships over the PDJ; seeing if suitable targets could be found in the Sam Neua area; seeking out B-52 targets (accurate recce was required); striking supplies, SAM and AAA sites in the Barthelemy Pass area; locating chokepoints for air strikes, and moving Cobras and gunships to Laos from Vietnam...

AID

The American Ambassador maintained a USAID representative in all five military regions. Beside IVS people, they were the only legitimate Americans recognized under the Geneva Accords allowed to work outside Vientiane. After Pop Buell suffered his first serious heart attack, Blaine Jensen was tacitly accorded responsibility for Military Region Two. Years of arduous work in less than ideal conditions, endemic diseases, and the local booze had taken a toll on Pop's Midwestern body. Consequently, at fifty-seven years old, the man was beset with numerous health issues. Losing Sam Tong did not help. The night of the attack, Buell had another mild heart attack. He did not arrive at Ban Son until mid-afternoon, and by that time Blaine had assumed the mantel of chief AID representative. It was really academic, as he had been performing this duty for about three years. Jensen verbally reported to the ambassador in the evening every time he was in Vientiane, and particularly after Sam Tong fell. He never had time off unless he was sick with malaria.

At daybreak on the 18th, Jensen and Doc Weldon flew north in a plane to Ban Son to organize the ensuing chaos into a more manageable form. They began searching for indigenous AID staff

workers on the myriad of trails leading south from Sam Tong. After communicating with some by radio, helicopters were obtained and sent to retrieve them. Food, relief supplies, and medicine were delivered to villagers walking to safety across the Nam Ngum. Those en route to Long Tieng were not supplied. Instead, items were delivered to Alternate where Vang Pao organized distribution, until, after resting, the refugees could be directed or moved south.

Moung Phun (LS-37), twelve miles southwest of Sam Tong, and other similar sites became critical waypoints for the weary souls streaming south out of harm's way from questionable villages. Numbering in the thousands, the people knew that AID representatives and air support in the form of helicopters, STOL, and cargo planes would deliver consumables and other necessities they required to survive and continue their long journey to Ban Son.

Except that derived from rotating pilots, not much news of any consequence reached Mac Thompson at Ban Houei Sai. However, he did hear that Sam Tong had gone down the tubes the previous night. Ever since Vang Pao lost the Plain of Jars, Mac had been anticipating something like this and had asked U.S. Army Captain Nelson and others flying into Site-20 to find and retrieve his skydiving parachute. It became a casualty of war.

Early radio reports from the field on Thursday, the nineteenth, indicated that enemy units had bypassed portions of Sam Tong and Tha Tam Bleung, leaving intact strong government positions. This was also the case to the north around Ban Na and east at Khang Kho, but no one believed the outposts would hold long if seriously pressured. Prognostications were correct when troops at Ban Na faded into jungle and were dislodged from positions on top of the long Phu Pha Sai finger.

Vang Pao's efforts with the General Staff at Vientiane to obtain more troops and counter the enemy offensive were rewarded by the arrival of an SGU battalion from Nam Yu, accompanied by Tony Poe. Larger units were being shuttled into the valley from Savannakhet and Pakse. The units fanned out, attempting to counter enemy advances and to clear Alternate's northern perimeter, while exhausted Meo troops were delegated to less arduous defense tasks both east and west.

Scheduled to standby, we did not return upcountry. This was likely the result of maintenance delays, deteriorating weather, attempts to clear the hills by air strikes, the increased large bird traffic delivering SGU units, and an incomplete assessment of the military situation.

LONG TIENG COMMUTES

The 20th began with what I specified as Long Tieng commutes (LTC). Exacting a cumulative physical toll, this chore entailed very long duty days--early departures from home in the dark, and late returns in the dark, while attempting to obtain nourishing food at home or the Club, and sufficient and restful sleep to continue flying during the brutal hot season. Naturally, family life was considerably dulled, in that, when I returned home the children were in bed and I was much too fatigued to fulfill my marital duties.

Deadheading on 12F (approaching ninety hours for the month, I was restricted to logging ferry time), I accompanied Nikki Fillipi and Tod Yourglich north to our focus of activity. Upon arrival, I took command of the 204. With other Bell crews participating, and more reinforcements periodically arriving from the south, we began seven shuttles to forward positions at TG8421, the second highest hilltop located between 20-Alternate and the Tha Tam Bleung valley. SGUs from the east continued

arriving by large planes and had to be relocated to parts of Skyline not yet occupied by Vietnamese units.

Charlie Weitz, Mike Jarina, and Flight Mechanic Ortillo arrived late in PFJ. Unable to perform constructive work, they returned to Udorn with the rest of our fleet.

Our efforts that day reaped some optimism that Long Tieng was still viable and would hold as a government base. However, as darkness enveloped the area, a small enemy unit managed to ascend the heights to the western portion of Skyline. Later, inaccurate 122mm rockets intermittently splashed the valley at various points as a Dac Cong unit infiltrated, making its way onto the runway.

Diplomats and military officers in the field were closer to the action and better disposed than their Washington counterparts to monitor and assess the dicey situation at Long Tieng. On the 20th, a high echelon meeting was conducted at the Udorn facility where pros and cons were weighed regarding introduction of additional Thai troops. Principals Ambassadors Unger, Godley, and Admiral McCain, along with the Vientiane Station Chief, staffs, and others generally opined that:

"Only ground troops supported by heavy TACAIR and Arc Light strikes could hold Long Tieng. A negative decision would take the last bit of fight out of Vang Pao. The fall of Long Tieng would cause Souvanna to negotiate from weakness in the projected talks with the Pathet Lao."

Even if two Thai battalions arrived promptly at Site-20A they would:

"...provide no guarantee that Long Tieng can be held through the next seventy-day critical period until the rains are expected to ease the pressure, but it is in our judgment that they improve the chances enough to justify the effort..."

Incoming air traffic was curtailed early Saturday until Skyline was partially cleared of enemy and rocket fire appeared over. USAF assets were lacking due to a southern SAR mission, but both Meo and Thai T-28 pilots, flying many sorties, took up the slack.

While other crews continued the Long Tieng commutes, I stood-by all day without turning a blade. The team of Weitz, Jarina, and Ortillo returned mid-morning to The Alternate and participated in troop positioning in the valley. They also shuttled men from Pha Phai (LS-65), east of Padong, to positions around Sam Tong.

SAR

Although continuing on a much-reduced scale compared to the tedious 1964-1965 period, Air America was still in the SAR business. On Saturday, the 21st, our helicopter crews conducted yet another successful recovery of a downed USAF pilot.

A little before 1000 hours Jim Richmond departed the Nakhon Phanom base in an OV-10 Bronco (Nail-37) to conduct a visual reconnaissance on the northeast Plain of Jars where the weather and visibility were not as bad as at Long Tieng. Completing his assigned work before the scheduled air strike, and lingering to perform post-strike recce, he elected to investigate activity further east along Route-7. Noting activity around the Ban Ban intersection, he continued east toward the border mapping interesting targets.

While rolling out to the west, the left wing of his aircraft was impacted by a large round. Losing lift and most control, Jim fought to reestablish control, but realized his dire circumstances when he saw copious flames steaming from the top of his left wing. Following a Mayday call to the ABCCC

control plane, he punched out into enemy territory, probably one of the worse places for an American to be in Laos.

After landing in a tree and eventually extracting himself, Richmond headed for cover and concealment. With enemy gunfire emanating from his rear, Jim entered a small bamboo stand and attempted to camouflage himself with leaves. As enemy soldiers beat through the area firing their weapons and looking for him, Jim remained calm, collected and quiet. Not discovering their prey, the soldiers began moving toward his distinctive orange and white parachute.

Forty-five minutes after ejecting, Laredo 01 an F-4C pilot, arrived in the area intent on locating him. Richmond made contact cautiously using his emergency radio, then his parachute was discovered by an A-1 pilot. Firefly 40 and 41 were the initial portion of a rescue force tasked to prep the area prior to the entry of the Jolly Greens.

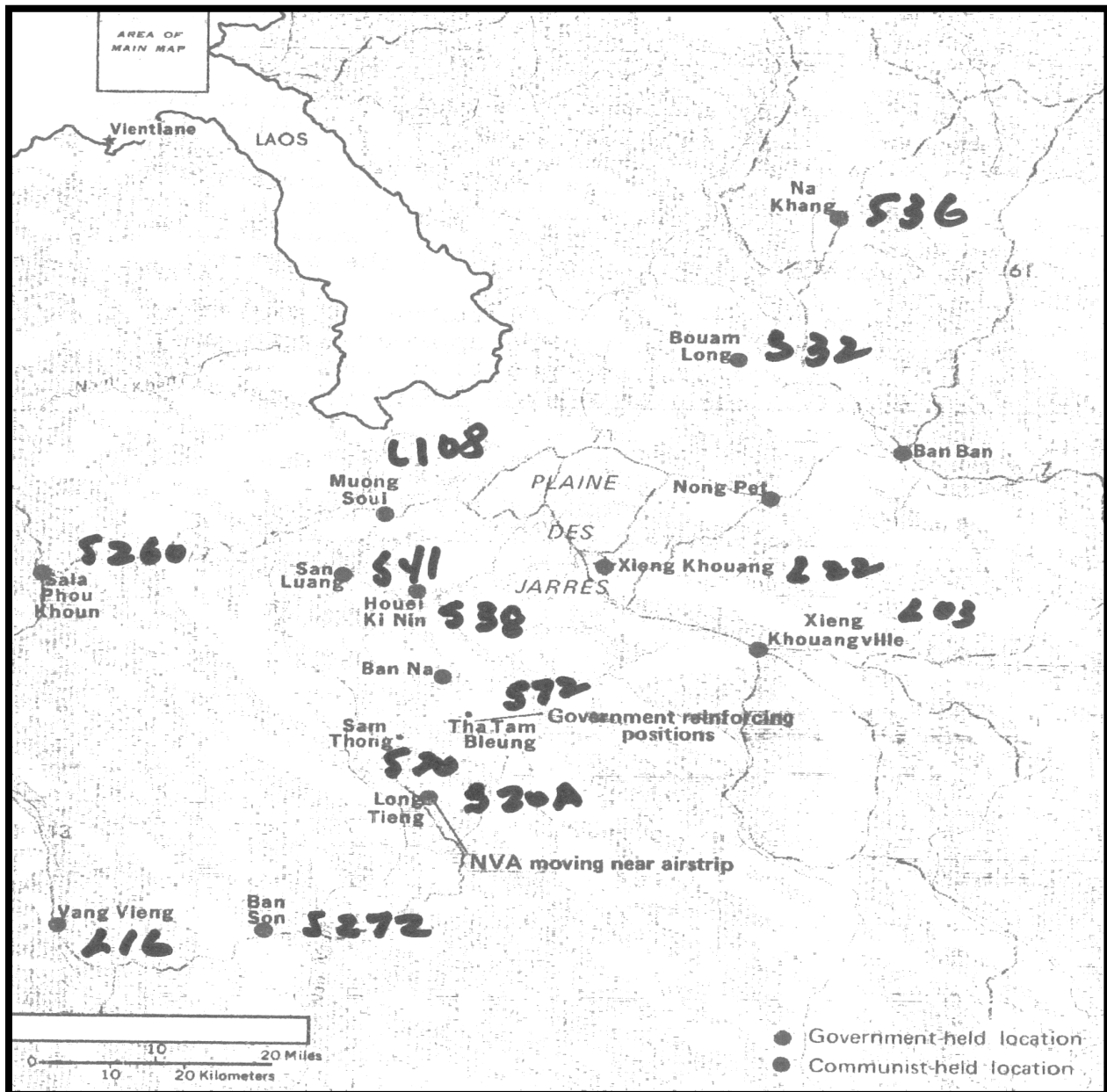
With Jim directing the show, the Fireflies bombed and strafed for twenty minutes before announcing Winchester. Laredo would remain to make strafing passes until the next group, Laredo 04 and Sandy 01 and 02, arrived.

While Jim continued directing airstrikes, Raven 41, flown by Hank Allen, arrived from Long Tieng to assist. Like the helicopter crews, Hank had commuted north to Long Tieng that morning.

Learning that the Jolly Greens were still holding at the Mekong River pending positive enemy neutralization, Allen radioed for Air America helicopter assistance.²⁷

With two Bell crews, the primary one consisting of Phil Goddard and Phil Peyton and Flight Mechanic Len Bevan, in the

²⁷ Only a few weeks before, a HH-53 had been shot down in the same area while attempting to retrieve a downed pilot.



03/21/70 CIA map displaying enemy probes in the Long Tieng Sam Tong area. The AID refugee operation was now located at Ban Son. Neutralists still controlled Vang Vieng to the southwest, but since the Route-13 thrust through the site to the administrative capital at Vientiane, it was considered a prime route of advance for the enemy if Long Tieng fell. Black dots are the same in the lower right-hand corner, but enemy controlled Na Khang, Nong Pet, Muong Soui, Xiang Khouang (the PDJ), and Xiang Khouang Ville.

area, Allen informed Richmond that it was time for him to move to a better area across a ridgeline, where the helicopters would not be exposed to enemy fire. Although somewhat skeptical about moving when the enemy was not completely neutralized, it was time to move, for the Sandy flight was low on ordnance, and the Bells were low on fuel. Jim crossed the hilltop and unceremoniously slid down the opposite slope through high grass. As the A-1 pilots strafed and dropped Willy Pete phosphorous bombs to deter enemy movement and provide a dense smoke screen, Phil Goddard moved into a high hovering position to avoid obstacles and effect the pickup. Once the hoist cable reached the ground, Jim placed the attached horse collar on and Bevan began reeling him up toward the cabin, when the long cable was blown into and caught in low standing trees.

With the enemy firing and rapidly approaching the recovery site, there was no time to continue hovering until the pilot was safely in the helicopter. Therefore, Goddard added power, pulled pitch, and jerked his "pluckee" (a favorite Goddard term used for SAR recovery) into the air and departed.

The Bell pilots headed for Bouam Long, added a drum of fuel, and continued to Long Tieng. After topping off, they RTB Udorn. ²⁸

LTC

I returned to The Alternate on Sunday in 12F with Mike Jarina and Dave Crowell. I had not flown in the same aircraft with Mike since our interesting and fun RON at Pakse in late August and early September of 1965, when, in addition to providing Mike a comprehensive area familiarization, I

²⁸Afterward: Other participants that day included a flight of F-105 bombers that attacked anti-aircraft positions along Route-7 and MiG aircraft that trolled for potential prey. Five days after the SAR, Hank Allen disappeared in an O-1E while commuting north to Alternate from Vientiane. Sadly, he was a short-timer, soon to RTB CONUS.

introduced him to the supreme joy of consuming Bam Mi Nam, a delicious Chinese egg noodle soup found in some of the local open-air shops.

Before rain impacted our area, somewhat curtailing operations, we spent much of the ten-landing day retrieving Ban Na troops who had recently abandoned Site-15 and disappeared into the jungle. If the men believed they were getting off easy, they were dead wrong, for, based on Vang Pao's orders, we redeployed them to frontline Skyline outposts. As sporadic rocket fire rained down on the valley, I attempted to take advantage of the towering karsts surrounding the east and west parking area for masking cover. It appeared that rockets were being launched in strings of three, so timing was important to assure "safe" operations. Tony Poe, who arrived with his Nam Yu troops, was one of the only Customers I could talk to frankly over the years and always receive a straight answer regarding a current military situation. Speaking to me without introducing normal CIA-speak, he indicated that patrols combing VP's farm on the north side of Skyline had discovered rockets and launcher equipment. The weapons were recently installed and fitted with timed chemical pencils that allowed the teams to vacate the area long before the rockets were airborne. Of all the weapons in the Vietnamese arsenal, I disliked rockets most. They rarely did much damage, but were stealthy terror implements that caused a fair amount of stress among those remaining in the valley.

UNSCHEDULED DOWN TIME

"I have been sick with something that has laid me low for about three weeks. I spent time in bed at home, the USAF Hospital in Udorn, and Bangkok Christian Hospital. No one knows what I had except it was a fever of unknown origin...I think one of the things was that I was just pooped out and the night we

spent in the bunker and then had to fly the next day [without sleep] did it. Then we stopped RON Long Tieng and had to get up early here, fly all day and then return. I probably was ready to get something."

04/13/70 Letter Home.

After arriving in Udorn, stowing my gear, turning in the logbook to Operations, and finding out I was not on the flight schedule the next day, I repaired to the Club bar for some liquid refreshment, conversation, and temporary relief from the war-time stress. As usual, I spent more time drinking beer than I should have, and returned home dehydrated and somewhat sloshed.

The next morning, I felt unwell, but chalked this up to a hangover from the excess intake of alcohol. However, after a couple days of showing no improvement, I went to the facility clinic. After a cursory examination, the doctor sent me home with some of his standard all-purpose pills.

After a few more days attempting to rest in bed, going to the clinic, and taking prescribed medicine, my condition continued to deteriorate. I was not improving. Marking the warmest portion of the year, the heat contributed to the inability to obtain restful sleep and allow my body to repair itself. Additionally, everything smelled or tasted horrible and I could not eat. Tuie tried many different foods, including normally delicious soup. Nothing appealed to me. Besides not eating, I remained dehydrated from excessive perspiring and became quite weak. Then I took Doctor No's "make everything better" tetracycline tablet on an empty stomach with a touch of water. It was not the right thing to do. Shortly afterward, I started feeling queasy and nauseous. Alarmed, I shouted to anyone downstairs that I needed to go to the Air Force hospital, something I should have done earlier.

Considerably weaker than I thought, I almost collapsed outside the house and had to be supported and helped to the Cortina by our houseboy. By then I was dry heaving and vomiting bile. Tuie pulled into a parking space in front of the hospital, but I was unable to depart the car, so Tuie went inside to obtain help. After the car door was opened, I was still not able to get out and again vomited green bile in the gutter.

With blinding ceiling lights illuminating my tortured body, I lay on the emergency room gurney for what seemed an eternity awaiting medical help. In my half-conscious state, the attendants appeared like specters and I actually believed that I was dying. Finally, a doctor arrived asking the inevitable question-what was wrong. I had no idea. That was why I was there-for help. Sometimes these guys were really stupid. Groggy, enveloped in a swirling haze, I cannot recall much of what I uttered, other than incoherent babbling about excessive line flying and combat fatigue.

To me combat fatigue was logical, for by then I was more involved in the war than I had previously supposed. Many varied aspects contributed to my sad condition. Losing the Plain of Jars after investing so much personal energy into the operation was depressing in itself. Months of stress and excitement from combat flying, getting shot at and hit, a night in the bunker and little sleep, capped by the long days involved in the Long Tieng commutes, and chronic fatigue all contributed to my condition. Moreover, a bad analysis from the fortune teller, worry about the outcome of FEPA and the impact on my job, did not help. This did not even factor attempts to cope with my job and balance aspects of family life. Certainly, all these items tended to seriously compromise my immune system, and I was surprised that the effects had not manifested earlier. I likened the current situation to periods in my life after the high

school football season when transitioning from high level daily physical activity to ones of lower proportion, I would get sick.

Of course, my wife and the doctor were not aware of these variables. How could a non-combat person ever equate to what we experienced in the front lines of Military Region Two?

I presented an enigma to the medical people, but was obviously sick to anyone with half a brain. Therefore, I was admitted to an open ward with several other Air Force types. Over the course of about a week tests were conducted revealing no overt problem, except that I exhibited daily afternoon low grade fevers. For lack of any definitive diagnosis, this condition was recorded in my chart as a "fever of unknown etiology." The bed rest in an air-conditioned environment, good food, relative quiet, and very pretty young American nurses, helped me gain strength and recover. Sleeping most of the time, except for temperature readings and eliminations, I rarely left my bed. Early during my stay, Phil Goddard and someone else visited, but I was still drifting in and out of consciousness and was not very communicative.

Finally, I was discharged and went home. I subsequently wrote a check to the Treasurer of the U.S. on the sixth for 371 dollars to defray expense for tests, food, and medicine.

Still feeling unwell, I informed the Air America doctor of my condition and we both agreed I should not fly. With the same old excuse, limited resources available in the clinic, he advised I journey to Bangkok and have additional tests conducted at the Bangkok Christian Hospital.

I was admitted to the hospital for examination, and over the course of two days that included several tests, except for a chronic low-grade fever, nothing else was discovered. This was puzzling, but a relief that nothing serious was apparently wrong with me.

While in the hospital, but ambulatory, I encountered a bedridden Doctor Reed, the Brit with the beautiful free-spirited wife, who were both allegedly involved with British MI-6. Reed had suffered an adverse reaction from anti-malarial drugs. I spent some time with him, but after he began expounding about the attributes of naturalism (nudism), I considered the man a complete kook. However, because of his condition, I discontinued my weekly doses of Primaquine.

I was home by 13 April. Feeling much better physically and mentally decided to return to work.

"Very sorry to hear you have been ill and naturally am quite concerned as to your full recovery. It is hard to understand in this enlightened age that the medical profession could not come up with a solution as to what caused the fever. In the dictionary there is a word 'Militaria' and the definition is 'military fever.' Do you think there is any relation?"

However, I am darn glad you are on the mend and are probably back on the job now."

04/22/70 Letter from Home.

WASHINGTON, MONDAY 23 MARCH 11:08 AM

In response to attendees' questions, CIA and the Joint Chiefs of Staff weighed in on military field estimates of the Long Tieng situation. There were 1,000 Vietnamese troops in the immediate vicinity of The Alternate, thousands in the surrounding hills, and considerably more on the Plain of Jars. Thus far, rocket fire had not impacted the runway.

With no supplies in the area, the enemy had logistical problems and the LOCs were clogged at muddy points. With slightly improved weather, these choke points were hit by numerous Tacair sorties on Sunday.

Three C-130 gunships had arrived from South Vietnam and would continue operating until the first week in April. Cobra

gunships required too much ground support, so would not be introduced.

The principal defense forces were special guerrilla units (SGU) from southern Laos. They were organized in inner and outer positions and would fight. However, the Vietnamese could attack at any time and capture the fortress if they were willing and prepared to lose many men.

One of the topics of the WSAG discussion regarded a letter Henry Kissinger received dated 22 March from Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman stating the RLG had requested Thai combat units. Thailand was prepared to implement this with one infantry battalion of 777 men if USG supplied the necessary materiel and logistical support.

Vang Pao desired additional Thai troops at Long Tieng, for that would release his Meo guerrilla units for helicopter insertion into northern hills where they could strike enemy rear supply lines around Ban Ban and the Plain.

There were both military and political problems to discuss regarding Thai troops:

Would the inexperienced unit be effective? Could they hold until onset of the rains? Where would they best be positioned--at Long Tieng, Site-272, Route-13, or at the border? Even if a Thai unit was sent to Site-20A there was little guarantee that they could hold.

Since such a movement would be impossible to implement clandestinely, this would certainly foster enormous backlash in the States from politicians and rabid anti-war advocates. Where was the point of diminishing returns? More Thai--more Vietnamese--more everything? What was the end game?

Chairman Kissinger summarized the meeting by collating attendees' opinions regarding additional Thai troops for Long Tieng's defense. It appeared that views were generally divided

between agencies. However, pending further information, the President that morning had indicated a tentative willingness to allow introduction of a unit.

During the afternoon Henry Kissinger dispatched a reply to Thanat's letter:

"...we are not convinced that the proposed deployment of Thai troops additional to those now serving in Laos with Sierra Romeo artillery battalion would be effective at this time. It is our current assessment that the fate of Long Tieng is not likely to be decided by the introduction of such additional troops."

Overtures were then made that a regimental combat team (RCT) be dispatched to an advanced base like Udorn for possible later use.

A WSAG meeting was convened the following afternoon to discuss pending issues, along with Souvanna Phouma's latest request for USG support for three Thai battalions that was capped with Godley's strong endorsement. An agreement was reached to send Souvanna a reply similar to the one delivered to Thanat.

Therefore, a State prepared message was approved by President Nixon and flashed to the U.S. Embassy, where Godley delivered it to the Prime Minister on the 25th.

Later that night State received a letter from Souvanna Phouma addressed to POTUS:

"Without any doubt the movement of Thai troops towards northern Thailand [to Udorn for hasty dispatch to Long Tieng if necessary] might to a certain extent, aid us, but I fear that it would be too late to stop the enemy offensive which is becoming more and more powerful. In my opinion and that of my immediate advisors [read U.S. Embassy staff], our defensive base at Long Tieng is the key to the defense of all central Laos. If this base were to fall it would have a disastrous psychological

effect and would open to the enemy a way to Vang Vieng and Vientiane. It is for the foregoing reasons, Mr. President, that I ask you to reconsider your decision in the light of current circumstances."

MR-2 AND LONG TIENG

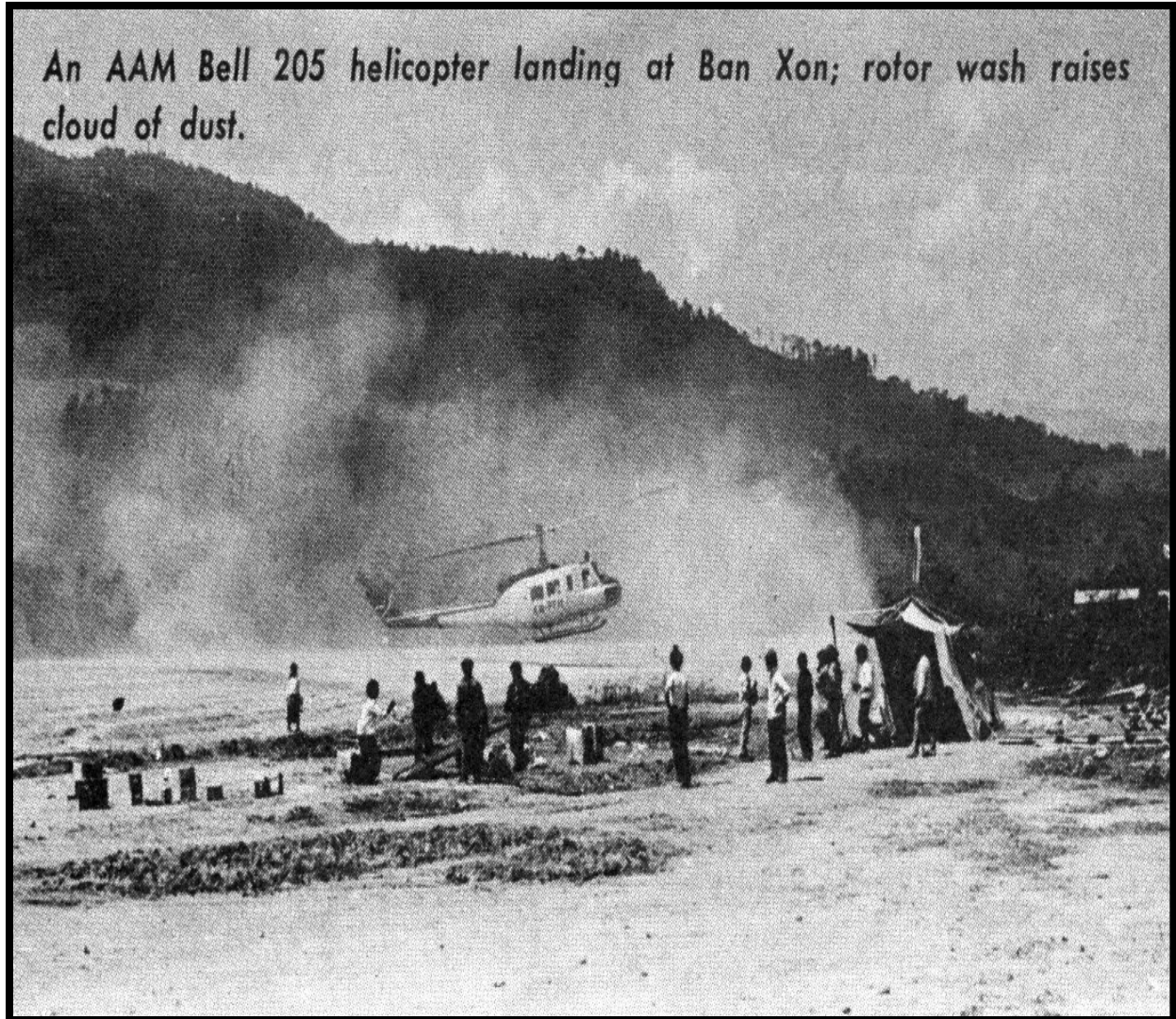
Scratch Kanach, Mike Jarina, and Bobby Barrow departed Udorn in Papa Foxtrot Hotel on the 23rd. After several days of low visibility, heavy rains cleared most of the smoke and haze from the immediate Long Tieng area, but air strikes precluded cargo and supporting air traffic from arriving, and helicopters from working in the valley. As a result, during the weather abbreviated day, the crew worked the Ban Son area before returning to Tango-08 via Wattay Airport.

Sometime after midnight a special enemy commando unit moved onto the eastern portion of Skyline and disabled the USAF-maintained TACAN navigation system. The unit was installed during 1966, and had been instrumental in the recent all-weather airstrikes.

Elsewhere, the government situation was deteriorating. To the east of Padong at Tha Vieng (LS-13), a small lowland village on Route-4, one that changed hands many times over the years, FAR and FAN troops had abandoned their forward positions and straggled east through Tha Thom (LS-11) and south toward Borikhane and Paksane.

Further east in Zone Steel, ADC and SGU troops were being pressured at Mounng Moc (LS-46A) and surrounding outposts.

Delayed by reports of enemy on eastern Skyline and weather conditions, late Tuesday morning the crew of Papa Foxtrot Hotel returned to Alternate and found the enemy had moved away from Tony Poe's Nam Yu battalion. Aided by the impressive firepower



The crew of PFH landing at Lima Site-272 to deposit passengers or wounded.

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of their recently-issued M-16 rifles and gunship support, the tenacity and motivation of the mixed hill tribesmen from upper Military Region One was duly noted with satisfaction, and they were tasked to move north and recapture Sam Tong ASAP.

Commutes from Udorn continued the following day. With Skyline cleared, and improved weather conditions, Kanach, Jarina, and Barrow worked a full day. As additional reinforcements, somewhat reluctantly contributed by other military regions, poured into the valley and reached 3,400 by Thursday, the troops were moved to local positions specified by individuals at air operations.

The crew chocked in and timed out at Udorn well after dark.

WASHINGTON, 03/25/70, 6:30-7:30 P.M.

The topic of dispatching additional Thai troops to Laos had not been resolved, and was still at the top of the Nixon Administration agenda. Kissinger spent the late morning with the President and CIA Director Richard Helms discussing the subject. Before the evening WSAG meeting, he was again closeted with Nixon.

Armed with the President's opinion that Laos should not be permitted to fall, he entered a WSAG meeting already underway. Options and information regarding sending Thai troops to Long Tieng were presented and discussed:

The regimental combat team (RCT) in question contained 770 infantry and one hundred support troops, but one battalion was deemed sufficient at present and would not likely promote political disapproval. However, even by introducing additional troops beyond the number being discussed, with the situation in flux, there was no guarantee the site could be held.

The order of battle, discounting the enemy division to the northeast, was estimated at 2,400 Vietnamese contesting 1,700

government troops defending the inner perimeter and 1,800 further removed. Fighting was characterized as vicious at times. On the 24th the enemy captured a forward position that Vang Pao's men had recently retaken. Moreover, the 312 Division waited in reserve, staged along Route-7. Depending on weather conditions, units could reach Long Tieng within four to seven days.

The enemy time frame for commencement of a full-scale attack was unknown. Probes of some positions were underway and 122mm rockets were softening up the base. But the airfield was still open for business. Moreover, [it was believed] the enemy had the greater part of three months remaining to accomplish their goal before the full effect of the monsoon season would complicate their offensive.

Airlift was available and moving an RCT upcountry from Udorn after it was assembled was not envisioned a problem. Addressing the timing, Henry Kissinger expected a complete operational plan calculated to move the Thai unit prepared and in his hands by the following morning. There was also a suggestion that the Black Panther Division might be introduced from South Vietnam in a pinch.

The meeting then centered on the fate of the Thai should the site fall, as opposed to a worse scenario at Vang Vieng on Route-13 if there was no attempt to defend Site-20A. It was also conjectured whether the introduction of Thai forces would provide the Meo an opportunity to conduct an orderly withdrawal to Ban Son? ²⁹

²⁹ There was no mention that friendly forces at Long Tieng included more troops from other military regions than local Meo.

MR2-LONG TIENG CONTINUES

The crew of Kanach, Jarina, and Barrow drove Papa Foxtrot Hotel hard, flying almost eleven hours on the 26th. During the twenty-six- landing day they partially supported the push to recover Sam Tong.

While Nam Yu troops occupied karsts just south of and overlooking Site-20, and Allied air pummeled the area, a large enemy force attacked. Heavy casualties were sustained by both sides. Soon afterward, exposed and under pressure from air strikes, overextended enemy units slowly began withdrawing into the jungle and hills between Ban Na and Phou Long Mat to join sister units on the Phou Long Mat hill mass (referred to as Hill 1900). They were soon reinforced by yet another regiment. The combined enemy forces and their heavy weapons constituted a formidable threat to Long Tieng.

Papa Foxtrot Hotel crewmembers also conducted two long trips east to the beleaguered Mounng Moc headquarters in Zone Steel, a site which fell three days later. While working the Site-46 area, they experienced a serious maintenance problem. After landing, Bobby Barrow determined that during the night someone in the Udorn Maintenance Department had inexplicably reversed the pitch change control rods. Mike was amazed; he thought contract manufacturers produced components that could not be incorrectly installed. Bobby laughed as he fixed the problem. Echoing Murphy, he indicated that if an item could be improperly installed, someone would do so.

With the military situation slightly improved, Mike flew single pilot with Barrow in PFG. While Nam Yu troops bided their time on high ground overlooking Sam Tong, because of nasty weather conditions around Long Tieng, Mike was assigned to work twelve miles east of Tha Thom around Mounng Nham (LS-63). Zone Steel pads in the hills were being reinforced to prepare a

defense for the aggression occurring further east in the Moung Moc area.

At the same time that Mike Jarina was grinding around upcountry, and Raven pilots were grounded at Wattay Airport, Major Blake recorded late Friday evening from his quarters:

"The rain keeps up. It never rains in March...but it is now, and it has been all day. Our weather prophets attribute it to a severe tropical depression in the atmosphere. They say it's too soon to tell if it's a fluke-or if the rainy season is really starting early, Can't tell if it's ever happened before.

Today-we sat...Had the ceiling lifted, we would have gone up. Vang Pao tried to get in [to Long Tieng] by chopper-no good. No radio contact with the north...Apparently the storms moved down from the north-weathermen estimate they must have hit Alternate just before midnight...Lower atmosphere is super unstable, and the heat rising from the ground...caused massive precipitation...

Banner headlines in the Bangkok papers about Long Tieng-as far as they're concerned, it's just about gone. Only a matter of days..."

WASHINGTON, THURSDAY 8:53-9:22 A.M.

With the situation at Long Tieng still critical, the President was intent on establishing a firm decision by noon on the movement of Thai forces to Laos. Pros and cons were rehashed, but the group was still divided. State and the Office of the Secretary of Defense were opposed; the Joint Chiefs and CIA in favor.

It was divulged that if given the green light, a move could be effected within twenty-four hours, with troops in place in thirty-six hours.

2:34-3:06 P.M.

Members of the WSAG were informed of President Nixon's decision to deliver a Thai battalion to Long Tieng ASAP. CIA would assume the responsibility of moving the unit, including internal communications. State would draft and submit messages to Thanat and Souvanna Phouma.

On Friday a letter from State arrived at the U.S. Embassy in Thailand. Ambassador Unger delivered it to Foreign Minister, Thanat, who in turn placed it in the hands of Prime Minister Thanom Kittkachorn. It read in part:

"...The President, after careful consideration, had decided to meet the request, it being understood that the Thai infantry forces involved will be a battalion of Thai troops, some 700 or 800 strong, now in Udorn. It is further understood that these forces will be moved as soon as possible to Long Tieng to assist in its defense and that the United States will provide material and logistic support for these Thai forces on generally the same basis and through the same channels as it does for the Sierra Romeo 9 unit now at Long Tieng. I also want you to know that we are taking immediate steps to improve the effectiveness of our air operations in support of your forces..."

A letter from President Nixon was also forwarded to Souvanna Phouma through the Vientiane Embassy, informing him that USG would support an airlift of a Thai battalion to Long Tieng.

28 March JNAF Summary of Operations.

"The unseasonably torrential rains continue today...At least nine inches have fallen since yesterday, and there is no sign of a letup. This morning the intense storm system spread into Thailand, effectively halting all U.S air operations until further notice. After numerous F-4 aircraft began having

difficulty returning to base with unexpended ordinance, even radar and all-weather sorties were canceled..."

Blake's journal was more specific:

"Nothing happening today. Phone lines are all down [in Vientiane]. We listened to Radio Hanoi for a while...according to them, Long Tieng has been taken and northern Laos is liberated..."

...today was to have been the day VP and I were to have led the diversionary charge up to the PDJ...We planned to leap into Xieng Khouang during early morning, shoot the hell out of the place, and get out at night...just to let the bad guys know we were still around..."

While efforts to reoccupy Sam Tong were underway, recently contested parts of Skyline were sanitized and a two-battalion force originally from Savannakhet moved from the northeast, charged to retake the heights of Phou Pha Sai. The goal was accomplished under the auspices of Allied bombing, after which a U.S. Army heavy-lift helicopter slung a 12,000-pound 155mm howitzer and ammunition to the western slope to support further troop movement north from Skyline.

With a 20,000-pound payload capability, the Sikorsky CH-54 Skycrane, sent from South Vietnam and temporarily assigned to Udorn, was used to haul artillery and unusual loads like steel TACAN Conex boxes in the mountains. The crane was uniquely designed to perform these missions, for some loads could be tucked into the indented fuselage to negate the swinging and oscillation associated with long line slings. Loads of this type could be carried to destinations at reasonable speeds.

One morning, while flying just north of Site-272, I saw a U.S. Army CH-54 delivering a TACAN unit to 6,000-foot Phu Kho, a mountain a few miles west of Ban Son, to replace the one lost on Skyline. Intrigued, I circled and watched as the machine

approached the prepared landing zone, hovered, and created one of the largest dust clouds I had ever observed on a mountaintop.

The Crane crews not only worked at Long Tieng, but also in southern Laos, and once at Xieng Lom and Nam Yu moving equipment too heavy for H-34s or Bells. During the process, the machine developed a mechanical problem and the crew flew it to the Ban Houei Sai parking ramp next to the strip. The helicopter sat there for a week, in plain view, before spare parts arrived from Danang, South Vietnam. In the meantime, reporters, tourists, and hippies arriving on Royal Lao Airlines would ask Mac Thompson about the huge machine. Shocked, he usually said, *"What are you talking about? What aircraft? I don't see anything. You must be joking."*

Joe Flipse had departed on home leave with his wife and daughter. Joe, generally fed up with the political wrangling in Laos, enjoyed the States so much that he never returned to Laos. To fill the gap, Mac was selected to work at Vientiane. He arrived during early June and spent the next five years working in logistics, supply, procurement, and contracting. He was in charge of the AID C-46 program. As the C-46 coordinator, he was responsible for all the rice delivery and canned meat contracts. Moreover, he was the supply and logistics officer overseeing food, pots, pans, and blankets. With these official duties, he did not journey into the field much after 1970. He did visit Luang Prabang once, but got to Long Tieng more often than Luang Prabang or Ban Houei Sai. In addition, the rainy season was nearing, an important factor that would deter the efficacy of the Vietnamese extended and beleaguered supply system from North Vietnam.

Saturday morning, Jarina and Phil Ortillo retraced the Long Tieng commute in PFJ. While Vang Pao's men were busy mopping up at Sam Tong and on Skyline, Mike was assigned to work at and in

the vicinity of Bouam Long. While returning to The Alternate later in the day, he stopped at Muang You (LS-261) on the Nam Khan, ten miles north of Phou Fa (LS-16). This was followed by a landing at Phou So (LS-57). When the day was over, Jarina had logged ten and a half hours and thirty-eight landings.

Also, on the 28th, the first units of the 800 Thai Army regular infantry troops boarded C-123 planes at Udorn to begin movement to Long Tieng. There the men were mustered, briefed, and then lifted by helicopters to replace SGU soldiers currently holding the Charlie positions inner defense perimeter along Skyline Ridge. Although the Thai troops possessed no combat experience, it was believed that they would provide adequate defense.

There had been a modicum of cooperation between FAR, FAN, and Meo guerrilla units in 1964 during Operation Triangle in reclaiming the Moung Soui, Moung Met, and other areas. However, the critical two-week period during March 1970, when Long Tieng and environs were in serious jeopardy of going down the tubes, marked the first time FAR (SGU) from all military regions (except Military Region Five) and Meo units cooperated, standing their ground to achieve a common goal under enemy duress. In a country where bug-out from the battlefield was the norm, this was considered truly remarkable.

Even though Vang Pao was never a Marine, one had to love the little guy, for he obviously believed that the best defense was offense. It was time to move out. The following day, supported by artillery from the Thai howitzer battery at Long Tieng, the influx of the Thai unit assuming inner perimeter positions, one Meo tube at Phu Pha Sai, and Allied air strikes, the general prepared to again move his battalions north toward, and possibly beyond Site-72. He planned to engage remnants of



Phu Sang Nao (LS-280), one of the friendly sites located adjacent to the Nam Khan, north of Phou Fa and Phou So.

Jarina Collection.

Vietnamese units remaining on high ridges where they could potentially deploy heavy weapons against The Alternate. The low ground at Ban Hin Tang, an old leper village southeast of Tha Tham Bleung, and in the valley below Phou Pha Sai, also needed to be cleared and tightly held to prevent enemy infiltration toward Long Tieng and Sam Tong along an improved artery from the PDJ. The project would prove ambitious, but with good local visibility returning to enhance the effectiveness of air strikes, it appeared Vang Pao now had sufficient men and machines to effect a limited offensive. The introduction of additional Thai infantry also accomplished wonders to lift the defenders' morale.

Two days later the weather pattern dramatically altered around Site-20A. With visibility unlimited all day, USAF air operations resumed.

Blake:

"With General Vang Pao's decision to return permanently to Long Tieng, operations here are being resumed normally as quickly as possible. Two Ravens, along with key maintenance personnel, will spend this and hopefully all following nights here...

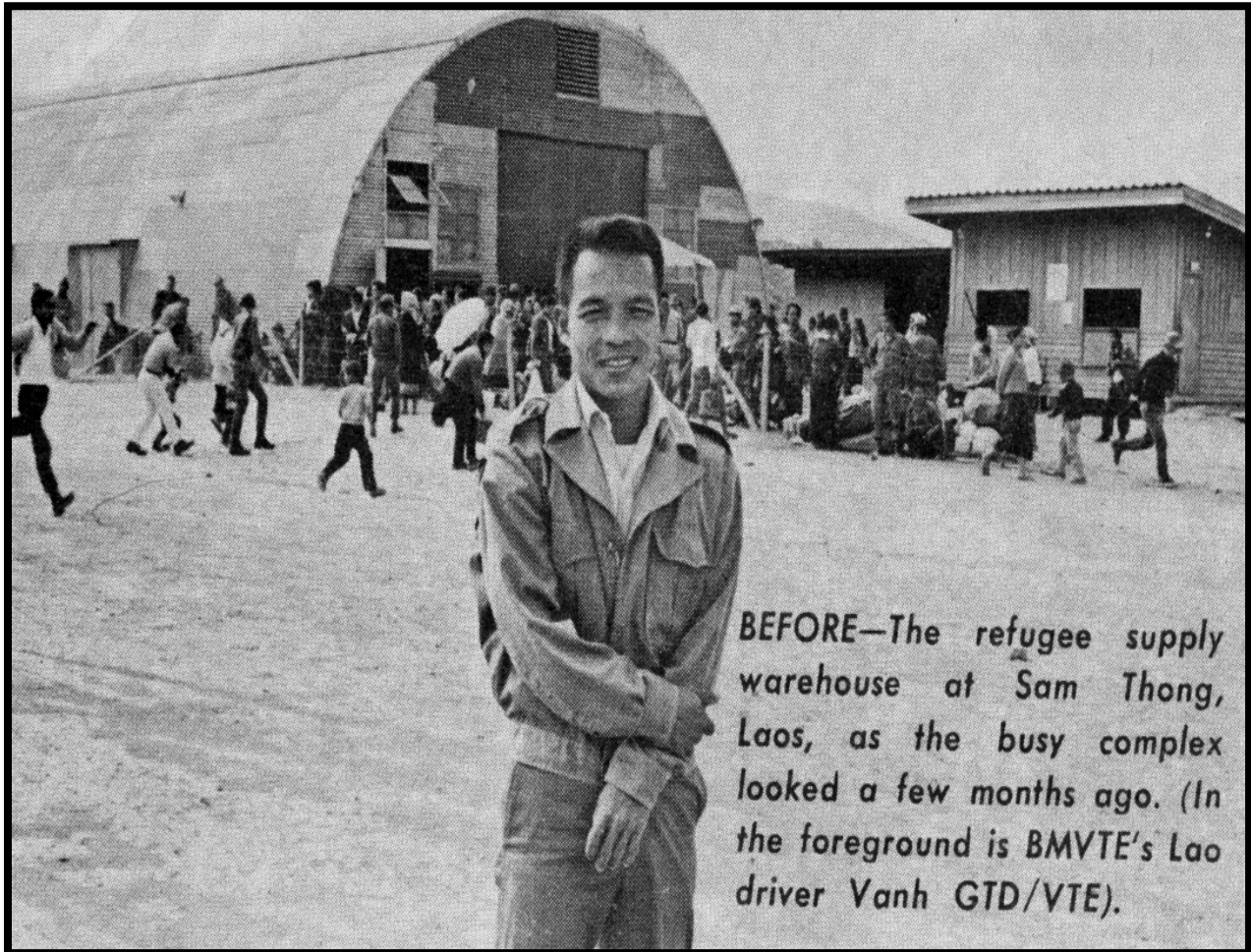
...The decision to remain with Vang Pao...looks good and inspires confidence in the troops to see us here...we can commence recce efforts an hour earlier in the morning...VP reports that his patrols fanned out this morning and encountered absolutely no...signs of the enemy within a [mile] of the valley...the weather forecast for the next few days is good and everyone knows that with air support assured the ground troops will hold their positions...

SAM TONG

After Tony Poe offered considerable motivation and incentives to move out on the offensive, his Nam Yu troops, assisted by the reconnaissance capabilities of the Agency's elite Commando Raiders recently rotated from duty at Attopeu and Saravane, moved unopposed into the Sam Tong bowl. A hasty inventory revealed that the enemy had consumed everything edible, including all the dogs or other animals. The enemy did not have sufficient time to booby-trap items, so booty being booty in any army, what the enemy missed, Military Region One troops stole. Then, toward the end of the month, they moved out of the valley to seize high ground to the east.

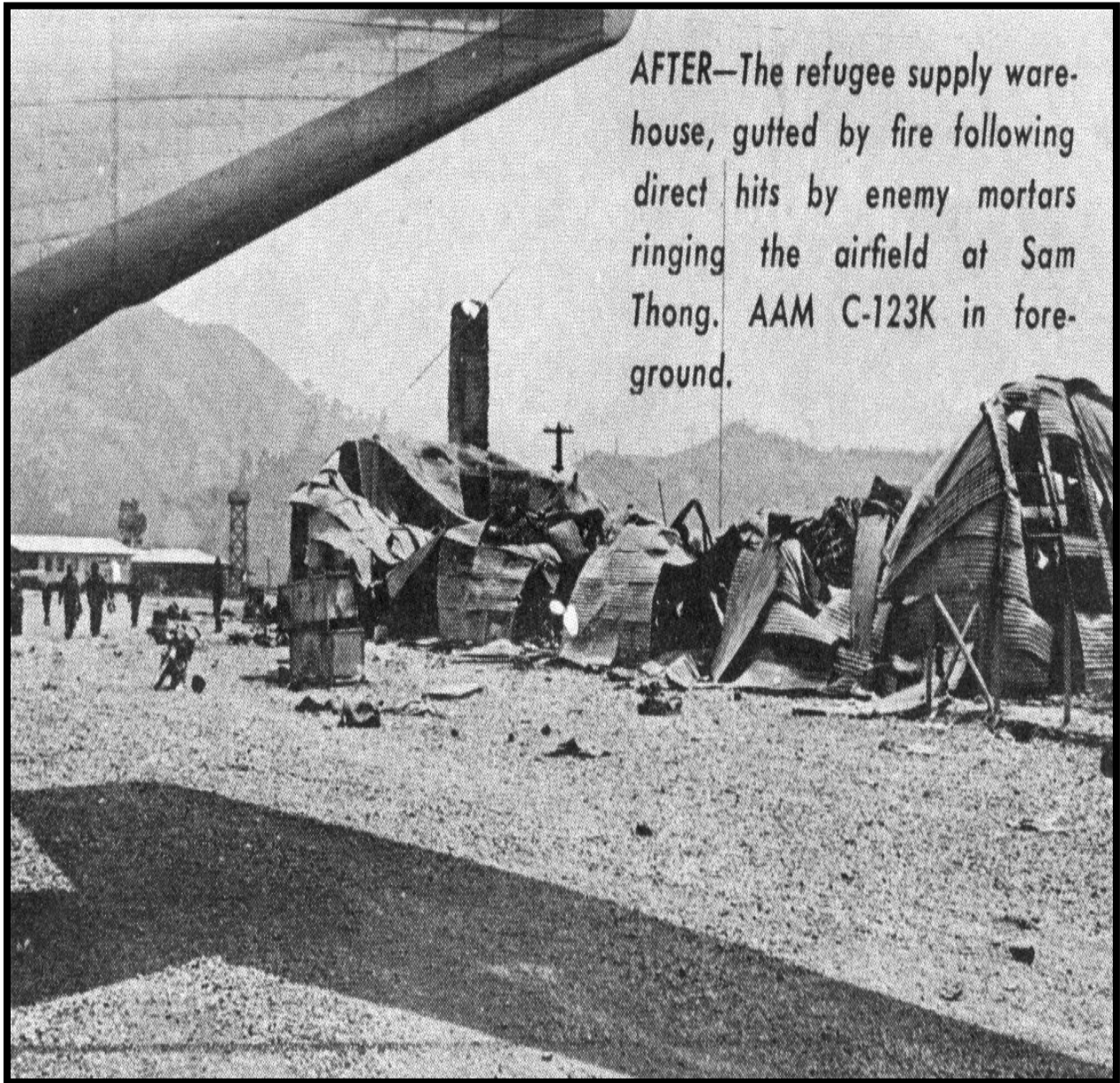
With the military pendulum finally swinging toward General Vang Pao, and Long Tieng's immediate future deemed considerably brighter, troops responded positively, redoubling their efforts to slowly push the Vietnamese north.

When Sam Tong was completely cleared and deemed secure, investigators discovered the USAID infrastructure a mess, first taking a hit from both accurate enemy mortar fire, and then from Allied bombing. Consumed by fire, the AID warehouse, along with 200 tons of rice, was totally destroyed. The hostel and hangar were still intact, but had been looted by both sides. Almost immediately after Sam Tong was loosely proclaimed back in government hands, C-123 crew and ground team efforts commenced a recovery and transfer of relatively undamaged items to Vientiane. This included rolling stock still considered valuable and salvageable. Considered too exposed and vulnerable to enemy attack, AID employees never returned to Sam Tong to re-establish the operation there. For the most part, Ban Son continued to be the focal point for the program, with representatives commuting daily from Vientiane. Aircraft refueling was instituted for a time at Site-20, but the Air America crew hostel never reopened.



USAID rice and refugee supply warehouse before the 18 March 1970 attack.

1970 *Air America Log*, Volume 4, #3, p8.

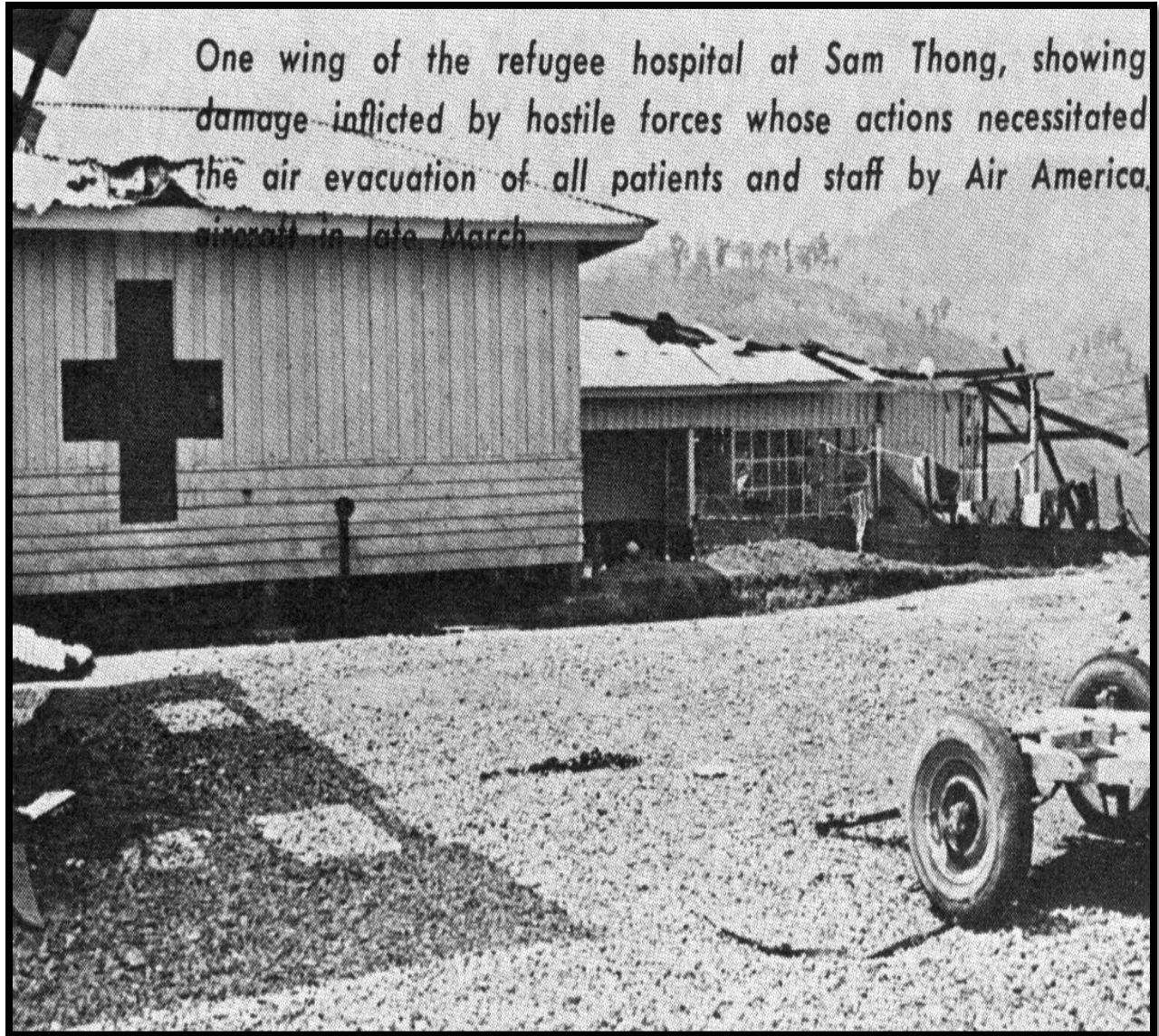


Destruction at Lima Site-20.
Air America Log.



Aerial view of the Sam Tong 200 bed hospital following the March attack.

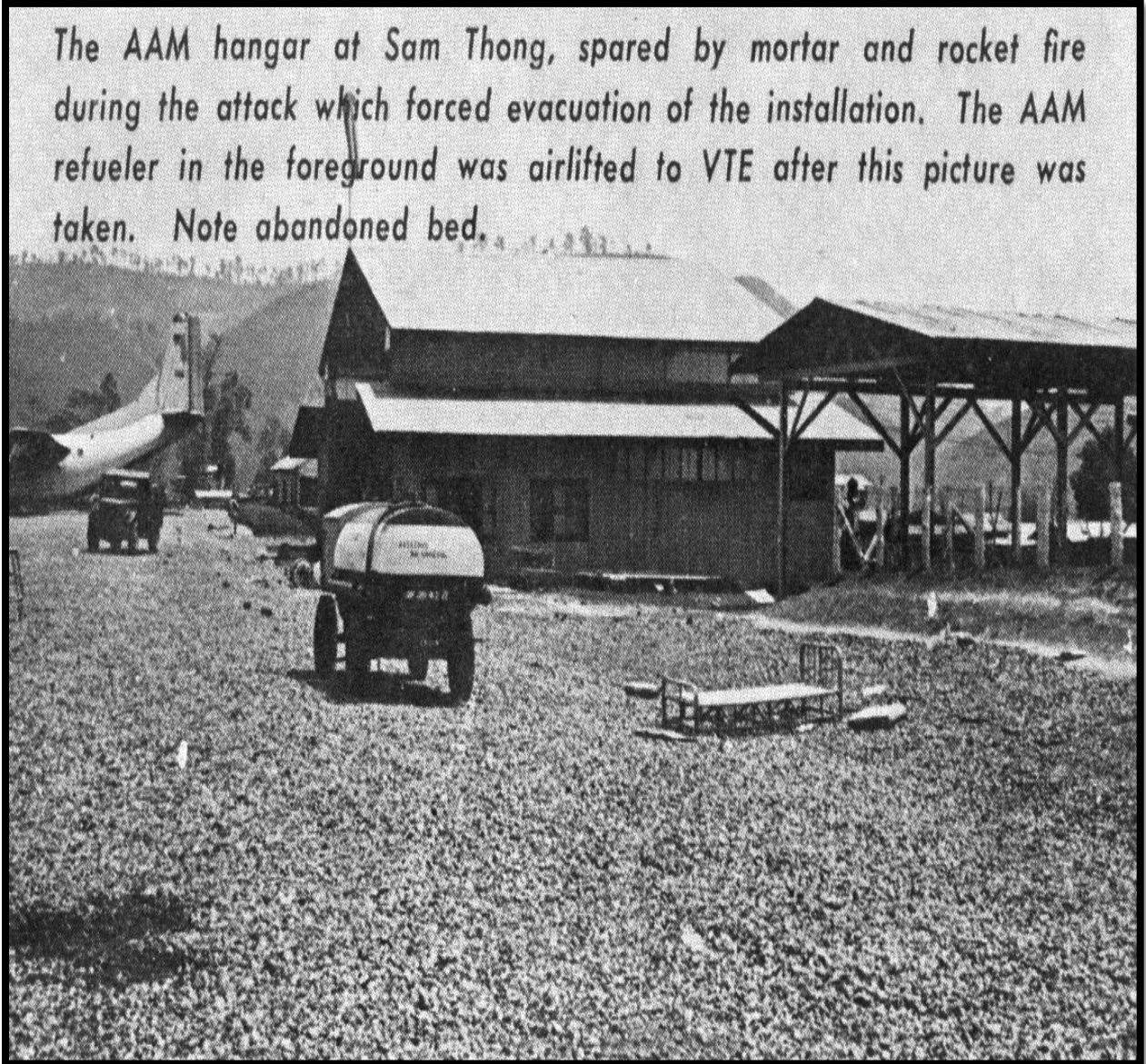
Author Collection.



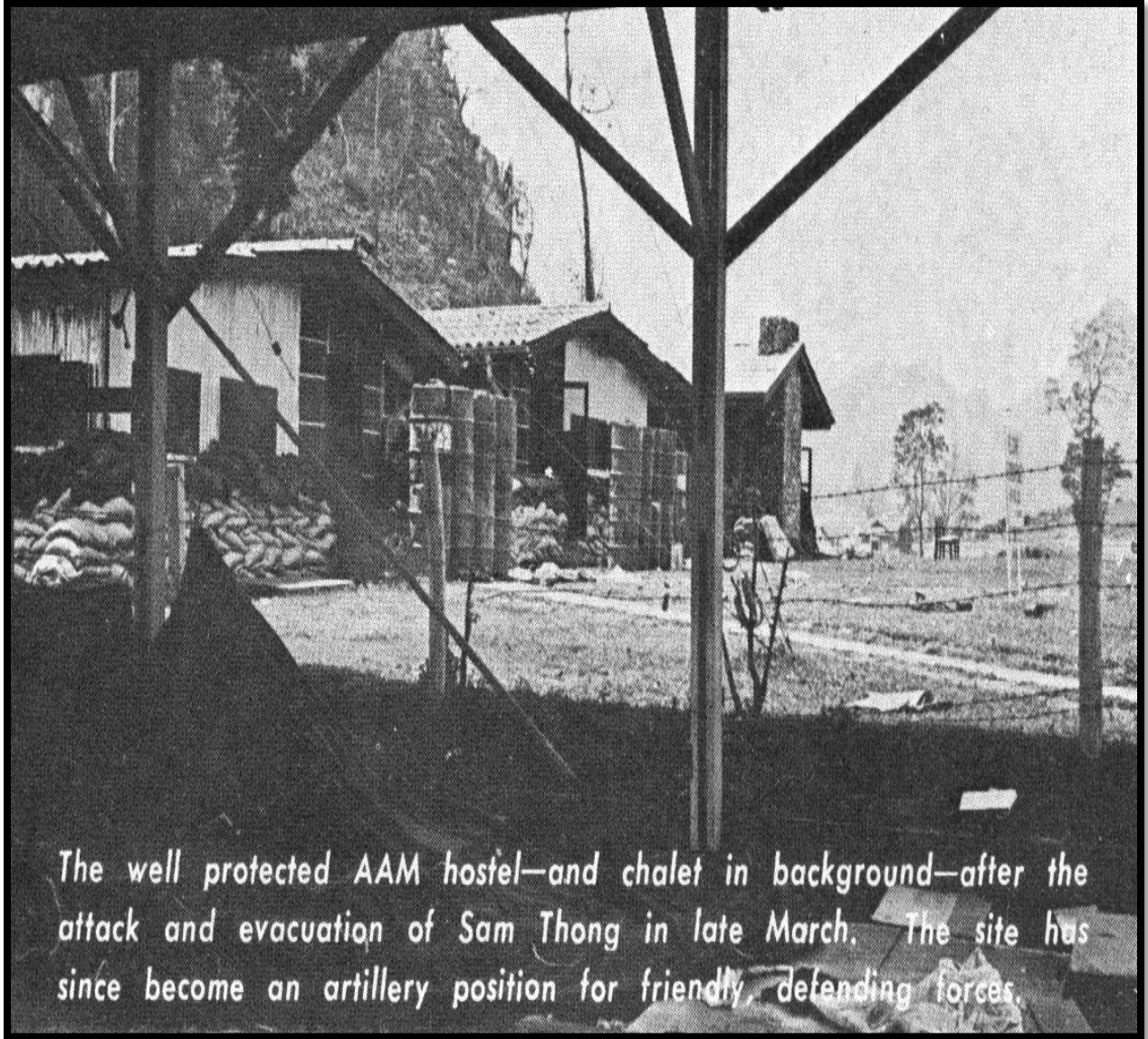
One wing of the refugee hospital at Sam Thong, showing damage inflicted by hostile forces whose actions necessitated the air evacuation of all patients and staff by Air America aircraft in late March.

Ground view of a portion of the damaged Site-20 hospital.
Air America Log.

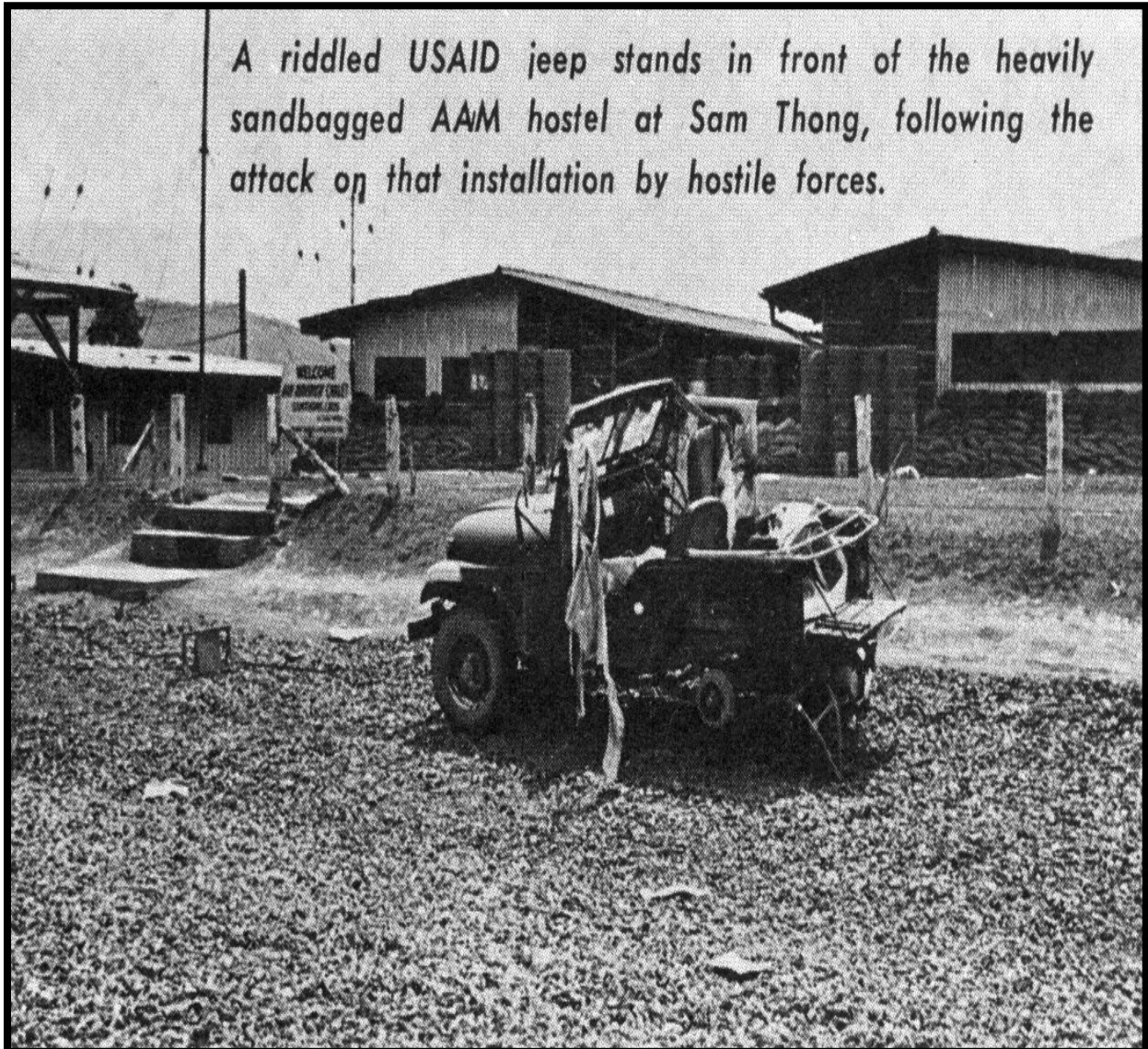
The AAM hangar at Sam Thong, spared by mortar and rocket fire during the attack which forced evacuation of the installation. The AAM refueler in the foreground was airlifted to VTE after this picture was taken. Note abandoned bed.



Sam Tong after 27 March 1970.
Air America Log.

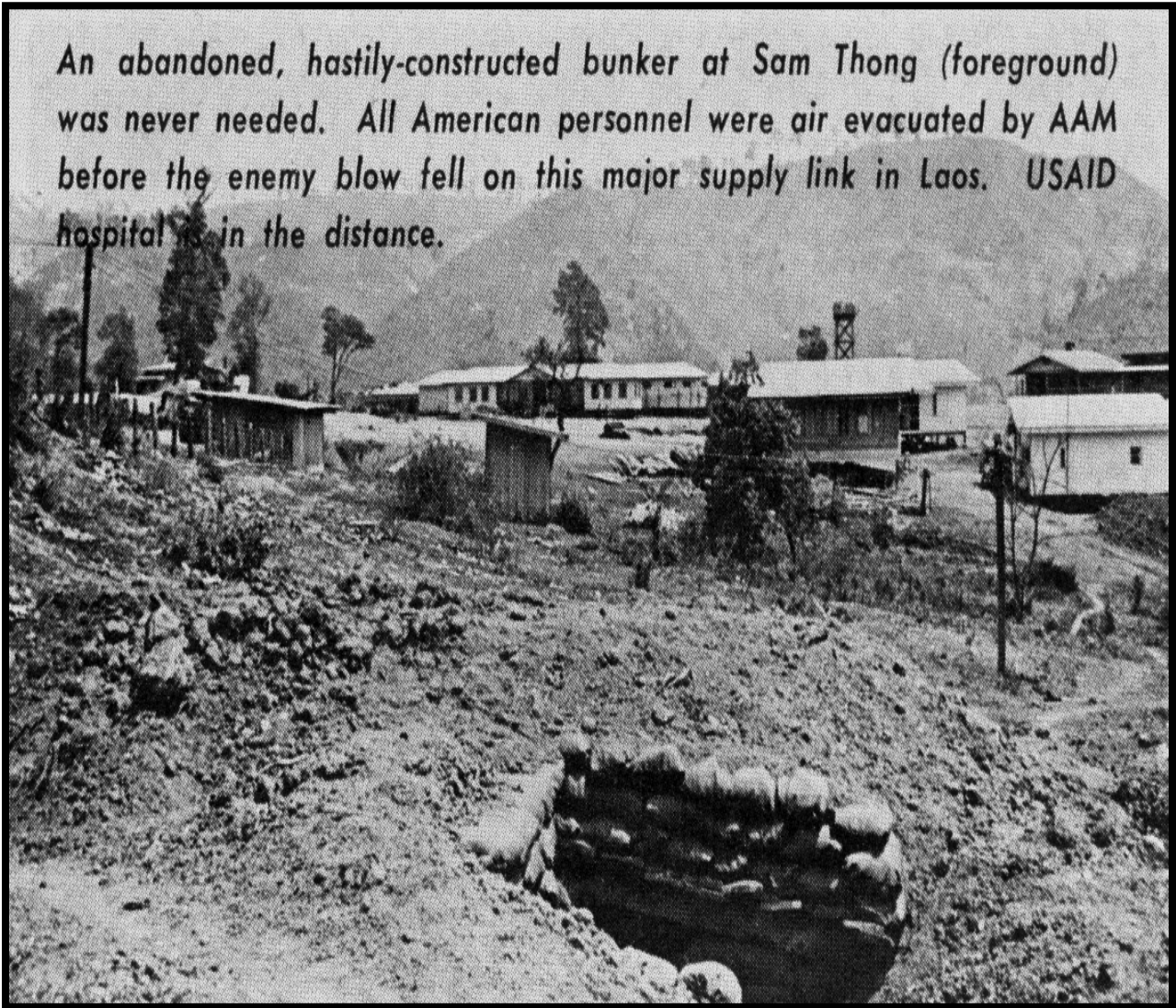


Air America Log.

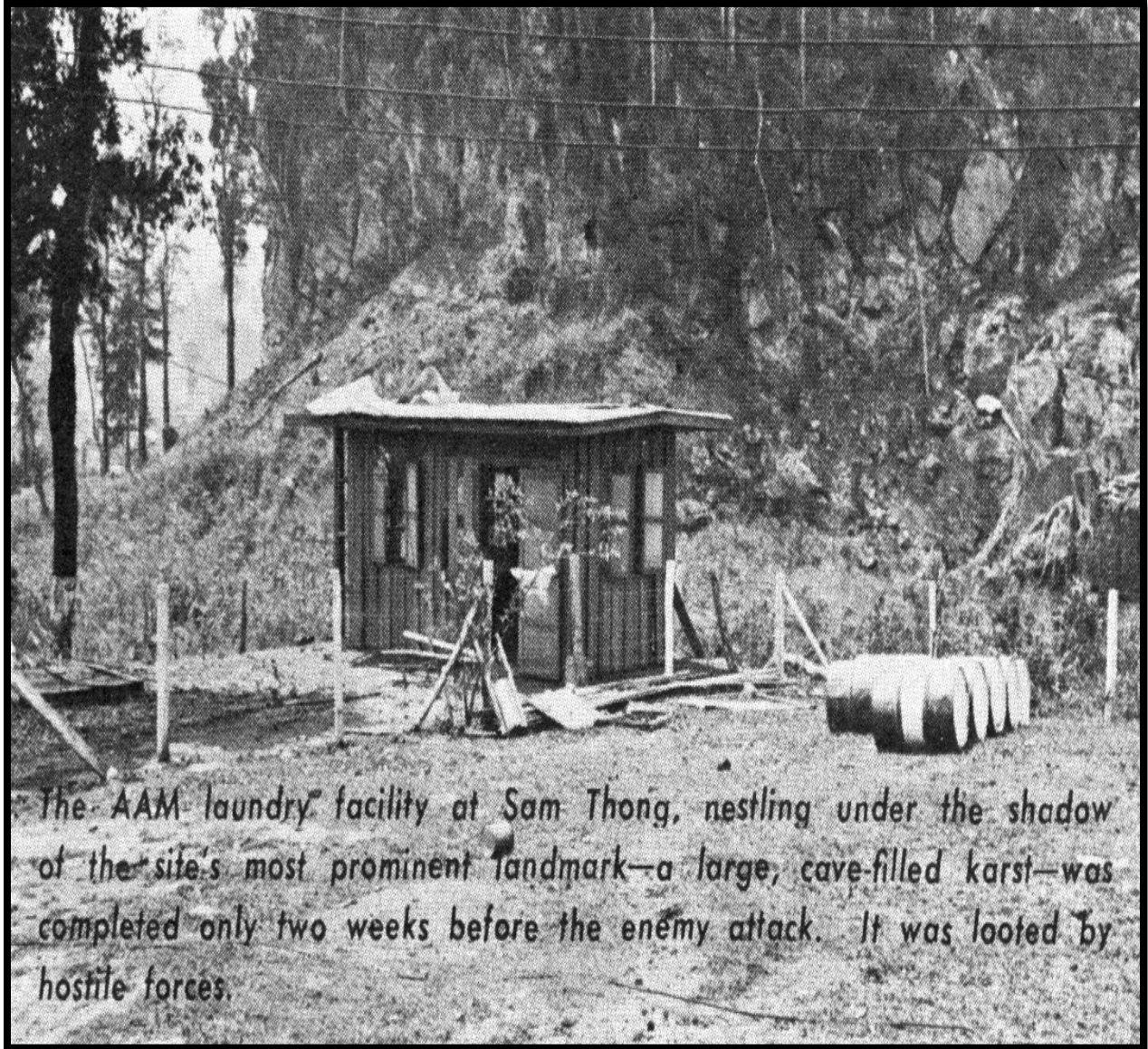


Air America Log.

An abandoned, hastily-constructed bunker at Sam Thong (foreground) was never needed. All American personnel were air evacuated by AAM before the enemy blow fell on this major supply link in Laos. USAID hospital is in the distance.



Air America Log.



Air America Log.



Southwest aerial view showing a myriad of road infrastructure leading south over Skyline Drive to Long Tieng and the bomb blasted and wasted Sam Tong valley.

Author Collection.

By the 30th, with troops occupying critical high ground about six miles from Long Tieng, Vang Pao and his people finally enjoyed a little breathing room.

On the same day, Jarina, Dave Crowell, and training Flight Mechanic Casio crewed Papa Foxtrot Juliet to the Alternate. Along with other helicopter personnel, they supported troop movements and supply missions to commanding ridges just north of Skyline. The fifty-landing day included trips to Padong and the Pha Phai (LS-65) area.

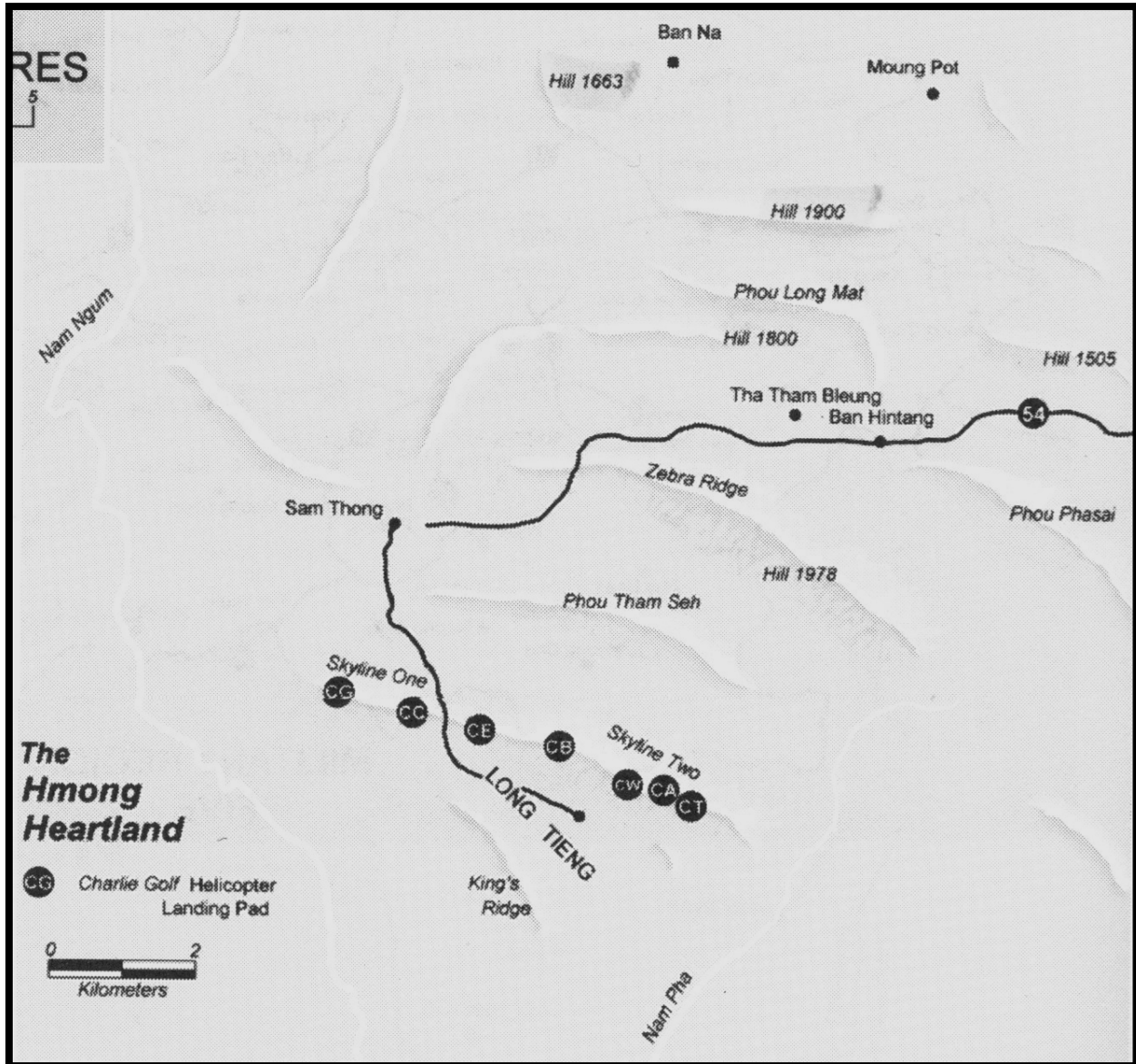
Tuesday, the final day of the month, included troop shuttles and sling loads to high ridges forward of Long Tieng. Jarina also returned to Padong, and Pha Phai. There was always danger involved in working newly constructed landing zones, especially just after occupying them. While flying north of Skyline to a pad located on the down slope portion of a ridge, Mike observed a mortar round exit a tube and arc up in front of him. This was followed by two mortar shells impacting a pad where Mike was working.

Part of a summary regarding Long Tieng that Major Blake did not send to Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) Washington read:

"All evidence points to the fact that Long Tieng has been held...Even though Sam Tong was reoccupied...without opposition and the enemy there has apparently abandoned his positions on the north ridge, even though Vang Pao's troops now occupy all territory around Long Tieng, here is an air of deepening mystery infusing the entire operation [leaving many unanswered questions]..."

The summary Blake did send to DIA through AIRA Vientiane stated:

"According to General Vang Pao..., the siege of Long Tieng has been lifted. He has called upon all his people to return to



Schematic of the principal terrain and areas contested and involved in the March/April 1970 Vietnamese offensive against Sam Tong and Long Tieng as described in the narrative. Friendly artillery was located on the King's Ridge and on Phou Pha Sai. Thai troops defended Skyline Two. In March, before Vang Pao's push north, Vietnamese forces were concentrating between Ban Na (north of Sam Tong) and in the eastern hills of Phou Long Mat.

Conboy, 432.

their homes, and has announced that the enemy has suffered a disastrous defeat...

In the face of what was reported to be a vastly superior enemy force, defenders consisting of Allied soldiers from many contiguous regions successfully withstood an 11-day assault which included 122mm rockets, mortar and artillery fire and direct attacks. Despite extremely poor weather and miserably dangerous flying conditions, U.S. air support assured the success of this major engagement...

When the weather was below visual minimums, radar bombing continuously pounded the enemy, destroying unknown numbers of supplies and no doubt inflicting numerous casualties. Our small force of Raven FACs repeatedly distinguished themselves, even while living under conditions of privation and hardship when ordered to evacuate. Nearly constant air attacks disrupted the enemy's timetable, and when the weather finally cleared, massed airstrikes harassed a withdrawing, no doubt, demoralized North Vietnamese division.

All praises should go where they are most deserved: to the valiant soldiers of General Vang Pao; to the intelligence community, who kept so well abreast of developments: ³⁰ to the USAF officers and men, both FAC and strike pilots, who relentlessly and efficiently did their jobs; and finally, to the combined determination of all joint forces involved, whose courage and devotion to duty ensured that Long Tieng, this year, would not fall."

³⁰ Noticeably lacking, but not surprising, there was no mention of Air America's participation by name.

KNIGHT ET. AL.

At the Udorn facility, CPH Knight was busy with numerous FCF flights and training sessions. On the 30th he conducted a proficiency check in H-34 Hotel-59 with Link Lockett, another Saigon transferee hired in early 1966. An older, bald-headed type, Link was famous as a civilian helicopter pilot who had conducted three high altitude landings at Mount McKinley on 17 May 1960.

During an all-hands rescue mission, and a second trip to the 17,200-foot pad, Link, a commercial helicopter pilot in Alaska, landed his two place Hiller-12E ship with less than twelve gallons of fuel to pick up a man with a broken leg. Unable to generate enough power in his reciprocating engine ship to achieve a takeoff with the extra man onboard, he asked two large, strapping men on the expedition to lift the small aircraft by the skids, and with thousands of feet of available space below him, throw the ship off the side, in order to dive and obtain proper flying speed.

During his stellar participation that day, Lockett not only set an altitude record for a helicopter, but he was also awarded the Carnegie Hero Medal and cash.

Wayne's final flight of the month included an upcountry

line check with Bob Bailey in Hotel-45. ³¹

³¹Total Segment Sources in Sequence:

Blaine Jensen Letters.

Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 328, 330.

Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 336-337.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 254-257.

James (Mule) Parker, *Timeline Battle for Skyline Ridge*, 6, From an Unpublished Manuscript Except for seventeen Copies Distributed to Individuals Including the Author.

Mike Jarina Interviews.

Mac Thompson Emails.

Jack Knotts Interview.

CIA Bulletin, Government Forces are still holding key defensive positions in the Long Tieng Area, but new enemy attacks could come at any time, 03/19/70.

John Pratt, *The Laotian Fragments* [a novel], (Viking Press, 1974) 194, 196, 216-219, 222, 124, from Raven commanding officer Major Blake's Journal.

John Pratt, *Vietnam Voices*, 428-429.

Defense Intelligence Summary AIRA Vientiane to DIA Washington in Fragments, 124.

CHECO.

FRUS Documents #203, #204, Minutes of Washington Special Actions Group Meeting: Laos & Hard Options on Laos, 03/19/70.

03/21/70 CIA Intelligence Bulletin, Laos: The government had moved additional reinforcements into Long Tieng, but the military situation continues to deteriorate.

FRUS Documents #207, Minutes of Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, Laos.

FRUS, Documents #209, #211, Laos, Thai Troops in Laos, 03/24/70, 03/25/70.

FRUS, WSAG Documents 212, 213, Laos, 03/26/70.

FRUS, Document #214, Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Thailand, Eyes Only for Ambassador, 03/27/70.

Jim Richmond, *Mission Over Laos*.

Christopher Robbins, *The Ravens: The Men who Flew in America's Secret War in Laos* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1987) 235.

CIA Bulletin, The Long Tieng Defense had been strengthened significantly in anticipation of a major enemy assault, 03/26/70.

Tammy Arbuckle. *Washington Star*, 03/27/70, Years earlier, Arbuckle claimed to Herb Baker and the Author at a Pakse restaurant one evening that he was the only foreign correspondent accredited by the Agency to ride on our aircraft and report on activity in Laos. Leery about reporters, we were not sure if we could believe him.

EW Knight Email of Recorded Flight Time.

Internet Accounts of Link Lockett's Extraordinary feat at Alaska's Mount McKinley.

"Throughout April and May, action centered around the Sam Tong to Long Tieng to Phou Pha Sai triangle and at Bouam Long. General Vang Pao's force of 6,000 guerrilla and FAR pushed out from the Long Tieng perimeter to retake the Tha Tam Bleung valley and LS-72..."

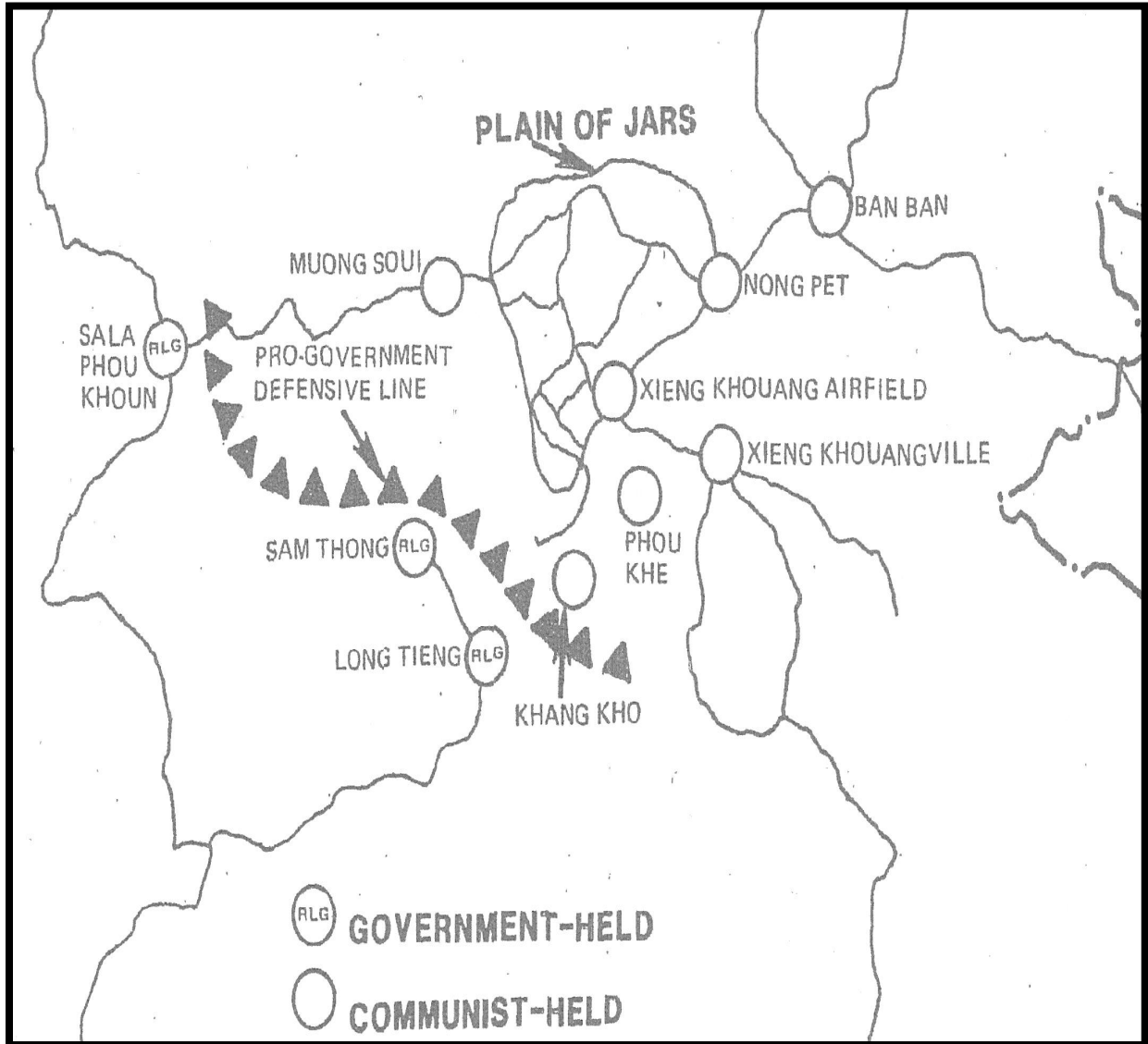
Harry Blount *CHECO Report: Air Operations in North Laos*, 10.

Flying Papa Foxtrot Gulf (PFG), Elder, Jarina, Shaffer, along with other helicopter crews commuted upcountry on the first to support Vang Pao's concerted move north beyond Skyline to a ridgeline overlooking Tha Tam Bleung that eventually became known by several names including Zebra, Sebra, and Romeo. ¹ Because of enemy presence, A1E and T-28 pilots were required to help clear the ridges, and eighteen Special Missions were conducted during the forty-landing day.

The operation was not without hazards. During movement north toward Site-72, a Customer, probably Black Lion, radioed Dick to land at his position. Once on the ground Wil Greene pointed to a nearby ridge, indicating that he wanted them to sling barbed wire to the forward position to keep his Pakse special guerrilla unit (SGU) troops from prematurely withdrawing. As they looked, a mortar round exploded close to the position. Dick turned to Mike, and then to Greene, saying, *"You mean where that mortar round just went off?"*

Sure that they would refuse the mission, Wil then indicated that there were two new positions on the ridge, and they could deliver the cargo to any pad that was not under fire.

¹ Sebra reflecting Thai inability to pronounce the letter Z. Because of landing zone designations, I used the term Romeo Ridge during this period.



The April RLG last ditch, thinly defended defense line in Military Region Two stretching almost fifty miles from southeast to northwest. Anything north of this thinly covered line was considered enemy territory.

Anthony, 331.

Beset with hairy situations, our pilots usually developed a way to execute a mission. While Skyraider pilots sanitized the area, the crew of Papa Foxtrot Gulf successfully delivered sling loads from The Alternate by creating diversions. Simulating an approach, they would abort, go around, then drop the load, and depart between incoming mortar rounds. It only took seconds to deliver a load at a pad, but timing and luck were still important to ensure longevity.

Captain Phil Peyton and other crews were assigned to the mission. With prevailing winds from the east, Phil conducted an approach parallel to the ridge and pickled his sling load. Almost simultaneously, an explosion occurred behind him causing smoke and dust to obscure the Bell. At first, Mike thought Peyton was history, until he emerged from the site.

Despite enemy resistance, the Bell crews completed the job and returned to Tango-08.

Scratch Kanach and Len Bevan joined Jarina on Thursday in PFG to commute upcountry and continue supporting Vang Pao's offensive effort. Toward the end of a long day of troop movement and sling loads, PFG experienced a maintenance problem. From the right seat, Jarina suddenly felt a bump-bump feed-back from the rotor system. Except for the curious bump, there was no noise or other indication of a problem. Mike had previously read an article or heard something regarding this condition, so he informed Scratch.

Not wasting any time with further evaluation, Scratch radioed, *"I've got it!"* Then he whipped PFG around and landed on the ridge overlooking LS-72. While the rotor blades were coasting down, Mike inquired what was wrong.

"I don't know, but we've landed."

After the blades stopped turning, Len climbed on top of the ship and soon determined that a trunion bearing on the rotor head was disintegrating.

It was too late to deliver parts and make repairs that day, so leaving the aircraft in place, the crew deadheaded home on 12F, Hotel-52 and Papa Foxtrot Juliet.

Following a day off while Papa Foxtrot Gulf was repaired, the same crew returned to fly the machine on Saturday for thirty-seven landings in the Site-72 area. On the same day, Wil Greene's troops moved off the hill into the eastern portion of the valley to clear Ban Hin Tang. To prevent a void in defenses, they were replaced by another battalion and eventually the Nam Yu contingent from Sam Tong.

BOUAM LONG

Enemy pressure emanating from the 141 Regiment of the 312 Vietnamese Division, along with supporting heavy weapons, was building around the valleys and hills west of Lima Site-32. The activity might well have been tailored to divert Vang Pao's attention from the critical Long Tieng salient, or to simply continue enemy policy of seizing all sizeable government positions still considered viable north of the Plain of Jars. At any rate, as the enemy had discovered during previous attacks, Bouam Long was not an easy goal to attain. Topography contributed greatly to this factor. Unlike Na Khang, Site-32's elevated, harsh terrain prevented easy access and provided numerous defensive positions. Moreover, the site was well defended by Cher Pao Moua's combat-seasoned and determined warriors.

On the fifth, Scratch, Mike, and Len returned to The Alternate in Papa Foxtrot Golf. With the situation to the north



Looking northwest at the Bouam Long bowl.
Parker Collection, 96.

of Skyline stabilizing, providing breathing room to the defenders of Long Tieng, and where people were already returning and Vang Pao's battalions were busy consolidating their positions overlooking the Site-72 valley, the crew was directed to work the LS-32 area.

Expecting the worst, not wanting to be encumbered by hordes of people, Cher Pao Moua was concerned by the continuous arrival of refugees in the already crowded valley, and the task of moving local families out of harm's way northwest to Phou Cum (LS-50) ahead of the enemy advance. Once there, the people could elect to remain in the area or be shuttled south by STOL aircraft to other sites.

Late in the day, after conducting twelve trips, the crew loaded passengers for Phou Da Phu (LS-103) in the Long Pot area, while returning to Long Tieng and then Udorn.

Both sides prepared for extended hostilities. Finally, on the tenth, Phou Then, an important Meo outpost to the southwest of Bouam Long, was lost. Soon after moving heavy crew-served weapons onto the high ground within range of the Site-32 perimeter and bowl, enemy rounds began splashing on defensive positions around the site.

The Long Tieng commute departures from Udorn were beginning earlier, at first light, either to conduct an FCF or to take advantage of maximum flight time in the field that was greatly diminished by the two-way two hour plus ferry trip. This often necessitated a preflight by flashlight, which was not the most recommended method to discover problems like leading edge battle damage or hairline cracks in major components. Consequently, after a day off, on Tuesday morning Jarina blocked in at 0430 hours (plus or minus thirty minutes under the FEPA contract) and departed before official sunrise. Relegated to a deadhead status, he flew to Long Tieng with Wayne Knight, Jack Knotts,

and Len Bevan in Papa Foxtrot Gulf. While the Chief Pilot switched to Papa Foxtrot Hotel and 13F to conduct upcountry route checks, they worked landing zones in the local area and then returned to Phou Cum to continue the refugee movement.

The following day Mike deadheaded to Long Tieng on C-123 293 to join Phil Payton in Bell 204 13F. During his abbreviated day they worked from the eastern Padong base, servicing positions on Phu Pha Sai and other areas.

On the ninth Mike returned to Site-20A in 13F with Dick Elder and Phil Ortillo to work forward areas around Site-72. This included one Special Mission.

During Jarina's Bell transition, flying mostly in the 205 model, he obtained little or no experience with the slightly different characteristics of the shorter 204 model. For some time, to minimize hovering downwash that disturbed fixed wing aircraft on the main ramp, and to expedite sling load operations, an area down strip and to the right had been allocated for this process.

Jarina soon learned the difficulty involved in judging load weights, and the apathy and lack of concern from indigenous and some American hook-up personnel. In their minds, sling loads were strictly the pilot's responsibility, until a pilot indicated that he could not perform and told them to lighten the load. Then the men were quick to declare that he was no good.²

After air taxiing to the designated sling area, Mike discovered the nature of the beast the hard way. He latched onto

² The Lycoming dash 1100 engines did not perform well in the mountains while hovering out of ground effect (OGE), as was necessary with many sling loads. Therefore, we did experience such problems at first. Shortening the line helped somewhat. However, after first being referred to the CPH office, and then to AB-1, the contentious matter was soon resolved, although new Customers generally continued to present a problem until schooled in our methods.

a loaded net with no idea of its total weight. Slated for a Skyline pad, he was barely able to lift the load off the tarmac for transition to flight. ³ Once airborne he elected to employ a technique, used successfully by Phil Goddard, with a heavy load by flying the final approach just above translational lift and releasing the load low over the landing zone. However, in this case the pad was located on a slight slope; after pickling the load, it smacked into the ground and rolled, useless, down the hill.

Mike believed some Customers failed to appreciate or comprehend a pilot's operational concerns. Solo OJT revealed much of this. Another time, while flying a 204, he was assigned to support Wil Greene's troops. Wil asked Mike to deliver a load to a 6,000-foot pinnacle. Mike was familiar with the pad, but, knowing that he was heavy with both a co-pilot and full fuel, he asked if he could defer the mission until lightening the ship by burning off fuel. Greene was adamant that he needed the task completed immediately. Jarina was equally stubborn, saying that he was unable to perform the mission safely.

Disgusted, Greene said, *"Call in Scratch. He will do it."*

Before being reassigned, Mike watched as Scratch, who had considerably less fuel, had his Flight Mechanic unload everything possible to lighten the ship. This included the mechanic's tool box, the jungle penetrator, and other removable items. Mike thought the effort should have afforded Greene a clue that something was seriously wrong with the load. ⁴

³ Beside the weight of a load, critical factors like wind direction, density altitude, and out-of-ground-effect (OGE) conditions influenced a pilot's ability to take off. These factors were prime considerations during the hottest period of the year.

⁴ This was not the first time Greene and Jarina locked horns. While flying the H-34 at PS-22 on the Bolovens Plateau, Mike also experienced some operational problems with Greene.

PHU BIA CLAIMS VICTIMS

On Friday morning, piloting C130A 56-510, Captain Kevin Cochrane and First Officer Huey Rogers departed Takhli with a load of fuel and munitions for Long Tieng. Onboard were four additional crew members: Navigator Roger McKean, Flight Engineer Milton Smart, and Air Freight Specialists (AFS or kickers) Gerald De Long and Billy Hester.

With the TACAN unit (Channel-113) and non-directional beacon (NDB) on Skyline previously destroyed by the enemy, after receiving radar vectors from USAF controllers in Thailand, Cochrane proceeded on top until arriving near their objective. With ground reference precluded by the high cloud cover, hoping to commence a visual approach, Cochrane descended through an opening in the vicinity of the 9,500-foot Phu Bia, about seventeen miles southwest of Site-20A. They did not make it. The plane plowed into the highest mountain in Laos near the top. Fire ensued, after which, with all the combustible material onboard, the plane exploded and burned for two days.

After the cargo ceased exploding, burning subsided, and the ship cooled, Scratch Kanach and JJ McCauley ferried Meo soldiers onto a lower self so they could scale the sheer cliffs to the crash site and establish a landing zone for extracting the crew bodies.

Vice President of Operations (VPFO) Don Teeters was in Udorn for a fact-finding trip on the day of the accident. After learning about the crash, CPH, Knight flew Don to Wattay Airport late in the day during an FCF of Papa Foxtrot Hotel.

SITUATION

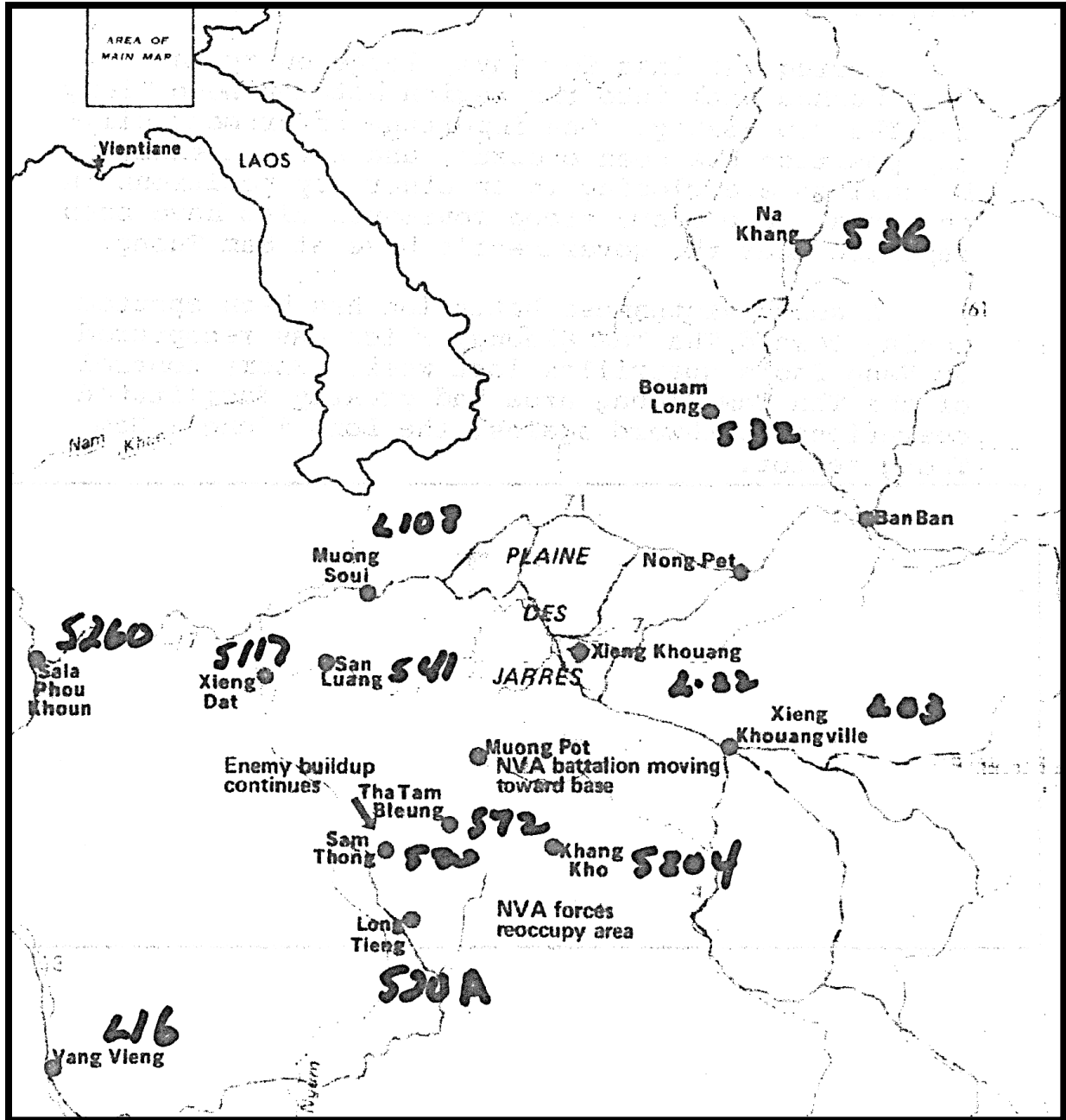
With enormous manpower reserves available, but short on necessary supplies, the enemy was not abandoning the aggressive 139 Campaign offensive.

While Vang Pao's battalions continued moving north, sizeable enemy units moved into the hills south of the Plain of Jars, and then forward from Moung Pot-Phou, Long Mat, and other areas between Long Tieng and the Tha Tam Bleung Valley. Since the retaking of Sam Tong, Delta and Golf pads were in the process of being established or expanded on high ground to the north, west, and east.

Undeterred by government defensive efforts, Vietnamese battalions moved forward to probe and attack strong points. Vicious fighting ensued. One friendly unit overlooking Site-20 was overrun after hours of siege tactics, with many casualties on both sides. Another Delta hilltop outpost one kilo northeast changed hands several times. With so many enemy battalions sighted or reported, the attacks caused speculation in U.S. Embassy agencies as to Sam Tong's ultimate survival.

Because of the increased fighting around Sam Tong, on the 12th Jarina, McCauley, and Ortillo blocked in at 0400 hours to fly Papa Foxtrot Juliet upcountry. After reaching Long Tieng, they flew all day with fourteen Special Missions that included support of beleaguered areas, retrieval of wounded, and flights to the C-130 crash site on Phu Bia.

Mike departed Udorn in Papa Foxtrot Juliet with Ortillo on Monday. Because the ongoing action around Site-20 clouded an accurate battlefield assessment, Jarina was ordered to stop at Wattay Airport until the situation became more transparent. After several hours of standing by on the ground, the crew finally reached Site-20A, but was immediately turned around when



04/15/70 CIA graphic depicting enemy movement toward Sam Tong and Phu Long Mat.

122mm rockets began falling near the runway. They blocked in at 1515 hours.

WASHINGTON, 14 APRIL

As the enemy moved back toward the main bases in Military Region Two, with the situation again approaching critical mass, Vang Pao and his advisors pressured Vientiane for additional manpower to save the day.

Therefore, on 11 April, Souvanna Phouma forwarded a request through U.S. Embassy Vientiane for more Thai troops. After the request worked its way through various channels and agencies for supervisory perusal and approval, it reached the President's attention by the 14th.

As was normal procedure, Kissinger and Nixon considered the pros and cons of the latest development. They were not radically different from previous discussions regarding deployment of the initial Thai infantry battalion.

Performed without publicity, there had been no media coverage or public attention focused on the first unit movement, and none envisioned for the projected second. The Thai infantry insertion performed wonders for the fatigued defenders' overall morale. Although the situation was still tenuous, the introduction of fresh troops contributed to the current stalemate in the immediate Long Tieng vicinity. A second battalion, complete with artillery support, was useful bolstering defenses at Alternate and relieving other RLA units for duty at fortress Bouam Long. This was considered important, for the current action at Site-32 tended to divert 312 division reserve units from marching on Long Tieng.

The request was approved.

T-28s

Vang Pao's increased activity in April required all Allied air that could be allocated to him. Because of the fifteen-degree runway upslope that resulted in accidents, the Thai pilots did not want to work at Long Tieng. Therefore, in order to move T-28s and crews closer to the battlefield, cut down ferry time between missions from Wattay Airport, and provide more daily sorties, USAID arranged to provide a bulldozer and personnel to recondition the strip at Ban Na Then (LS-249). Located a few miles south of Moung Kassy (LS-153), and north of the Vang Vieng Valley, a straight section on Route-13 was widened and packed with laterite dirt. The 4,300-foot strip was initially constructed in 1969, but never used as an alternate T-28 site should Moung Soui fall.

Following a brief test period, the Thai pilots did not want to continue flying there because of a small hill creating an obstacle off the end of the runway. An experienced AID construction equipment employee worked for a week leveling several hundred feet of the hill and rerouting the river.

With Lieutenant Colonel Bill Keeler authorizing the move, and Major Jesse Scott supervising the operation, a temporary Air Operations Center (AOC) was established and the strip opened for business by mid-month. Citing one excuse after another, the Thai pilots next refused to fly out of the site because of a lack of crash rescue equipment, something they had been flying without in Laos for years. Then they demanded additional combat pay and there were additional problems. Because of the constant Thai demands and reluctance to perform combat missions, the "B" Team program was reassessed. Since there were a sufficient number of Lao pilots in the system, by July, AIRA Chief Colonel Tyrell and Bill Keeler talked with General THEP regarding the situation.

Afterward, Thai participation flying T-28s in Laos was canceled and became history.

With the Thai pilots waffling, a T-28 detachment from Savannakhet took up the slack. About six T-28 pilots flew seven missions a day each from the site. Operations continued until 11 June, when heavy rains rendered the field unusable, the operation was terminated, and the detachment soon rotated back to Lima-39.

Keeler expressed an interesting perspective regarding the Royal Lao Army (RLA) fighting man:

"Individually, man for man, they're tough. Organizationally-wise, they don't really have the push. All their system delves back to this Supreme Commander. Your boss is the boss and you don't do anything but what he says. This is why they fall apart in the field. They don't have as we do, somebody to think. A lieutenant gets knocked off, there isn't a sergeant you can promote to lieutenant to do the same job. As they lose one or two they quit. They say they will come back tomorrow. I've been fighting 50 years and there's nothing to win. They don't have a tour, but have been fighting for years and years. There is no place to go. And they can't kick the enemy out of their country.

Their big problem is they have a small force. If you send them all out and lose them all, there are no replacements. You can't commit everything. Those generals have their ass to consider too. In Laos you speak with power and authority when you command troops. When you lose your troops, you don't have and power base. When you lose your economic status; you lose your political status. In many cases you don't have the best to stand and fight. You've got to run so you can stay alive and fight again sometime."

SITE-32 AREA

While the enemy attacked Bouam Long, mostly from the west, other Vietnamese units ranged throughout hills north of Ban Ban, methodically overrunning Meo villages believed still capable of supporting ADC intelligence gathering, or of mounting harassing action against personnel along the Routes-61 and 7 LOCs.

Tuesday Goddard, Jarina, and Ortillo flew direct to Phu Cum in Papa Foxtrot Gulf with another helicopter crew to participate in a Special Mission. After a stop at Bouam Long to await escort, they launched thirty-five miles east for Sam Song Hong (LS-201) and then Phou San Soum (LS-231). After moving or retrieving key people, they departed for home.

Over a period of several days, in order to save villagers and other persons in outlying areas from certain death or capture, sometimes under fire, Air America aircraft moved 3,500 refugees from Site-231 to Site-50. No aircraft were impacted by ground fire during the operation.

As was becoming the norm, designed to draw attention to Vietnamese aggression, the movement was publicized and an article in the *Washington Star* stated:

"Air America aircraft transported 4,000 new refugees from LS-32. ⁵ Post under sporadic fire from the commies. The refugees are being taken to Long Tieng and then on to areas near Vientiane."

AID also released information regarding refugees created by the war:

"...AID counted 700,000 refugees since the Lao war heated up in 1964. Some have entered the refugee rolls several times as

⁵ Either the information was very tardy or the LS-231 site number was withheld by AID public relations officers for some reason.



The enemy cleared the Phou Sam Soum (Site-231) and Phou Se Bott (Site-82) areas north of Ban Ban to the upper right of the map. Ahern, 340.

the communists made territorial gains. About 200,000 are from this year's battles [and bombing] in North Laos.

The people grow enough food in their villages to sustain them, but lack protein. American aircraft drop sacks of rice with tins of meat embedded within. AID supplies everything from salt to pots and pans. A refugee is kept on the books until he has had three successful harvests.

When they become refugees and have to walk over the mountains in the rain and cold, their bodies lack vitamins to resist disease and they get malaria, various forms of diarrhea, fevers and recently measles. They are mostly all suffering from malnutrition in the form of diet deficiencies which [AID attempts] to make up with meats, fish meal, and milk. Deficiencies come from a lifetime of malnutrition..."

BACK ON THE LINE-LTC

Feeling much better, anxious to get back to work, I returned to the field on the 15th. With Long Tieng Commutes still in vogue, Goddard, Flight Mechanic Daniels, and I ferried Papa Foxtrot Gulf (PFG) to The Alternate. I suppose Phil was along in case there was a double crew requirement for wounded extraction, or perhaps to judge my psychological and physical ability to hack the job. With the influx of Thai troops arriving in the valley, and a new 105mm firebase being established on Skyline, there was abundant work for heli-lift machines.

Apparently satisfied with my performance, Goddard moved on to another ship to conduct a route check requirement. I continued to shuttle men and supplies to the three forward ridges until late in the day, when I was reassigned to retrieve C-130 crew bodies from Phu Bia.

Attesting to the degree of difficulty involved in the recovery process, it had been five days since the crash. While

the site above cooled, Meo mountaineers cleared vegetation and trees to fashion a small landing zone on a southern ledge. Then they scaled a few hundred feet of the mountainside to sift through the ashes and twisted metal for human remains. Since the plane contained a six-man crew, I am not sure if all the remains had been discovered and if this was the first lift.

Three military issue body bags, one containing the remains of Cochrane, lay on the ground. The bags were relatively new for our operation, and compared to previous encounters with deceased, did a lot for my olfactory senses. For years, the dead had been transported either in their bloody uniforms or wrapped in nylon drop parachutes. Sometimes unbelievably noxious odors wafting into the cockpit were deadly, almost causing me to vomit and crash on takeoff. On one occasion PARU Lipo had recommended that I tie a handkerchief over my lower face and place some Thai cologne (we called foo-foo juice) on the tip of my nose. His system worked and there were no more near crashes. In addition to containing bodily liquids and gaseous emissions, the new bags were fairly stiff, tending to prevent bodies from rising to a sitting position during ascent to altitude. Thus, the new bags went a long way toward preserving the sanity of our superstitious Filipino Flight Mechanics.

Less than a month later, my Father sent a letter asking if I knew Cochrane. Apparently, Dad's brother George, who lived in Florida, knew his parents:

"It is ironic that you asked me about Cochrane as I brought his body to Udorn from upcountry. I can't remember what he looked like, but am sure that I knew him casually. Most of the people in Vientiane I know when I see them, but might not know their names. This guy was the Captain of the aircraft. They let down into a mountain and no one knows why. QED."

05/29/70 Letter Home.

When the three remains were loaded, I returned to Tango-08 for the night. I had flown more than ten and a half hours and held up reasonably well following my bout of sickness.

After being off the flight schedule for so long, I expected to fly the maximum amount of time. Additionally, we were short of pilots needed to fulfill double crew requirements for the escalating frontline work. Therefore, the schedule indicated that I was to work with Frenchy Smith and Terry Dunn in Papa Foxtrot Juliet early Thursday morning.

Arriving at Long Tieng, we began shuttling Thai troops to Skyline, and other SGU soldiers and sling loads to northern forward defensive lines. Because of his seniority with the Company, I had not flown much with Frenchy. But knowing his reputation as an excellent pilot and vast experience, I was very happy to have him along to share the danger and arduous work load. We did this until it was time to RTB.

The next day, still using Juliet, we were assigned to support the defenders of Bouam Long. Improved weather allowing accurate air strikes had largely quelled daytime enemy artillery fire on the base. Cargo drops had also been accumulating in the bowl. Boxes of ammo were haphazardly stacked on the sides of the strip and it became our duty to sling them to surrounding pads overlooking the bowl. I could sense some urgency involved in the task.

Honchoed by a Case Officer, the work was well organized and round trips to adjacent pinnacle outposts only required minutes. My head was spinning by the time we had to leave for Long Tieng and Udorn. I estimated that we had hauled between 100 to 150 loads. Saturday morning, with immediate enemy pressure on Long Tieng receding, I returned to work The Alternate single pilot. Phil Velasquez had replaced Dunn. As I shuttled goods and troops to pads overlooking the valley and those beyond, I sensed a

somewhat lessened tension among Air Operations personnel and their helpers. This feeling became infectious and I began to relax a bit during the day. It extended to home time, where I enjoyed better sleep patterns, still awaking somewhat groggy, but no longer particularly concerned about the enemy taking Long Tieng.

A paper describing the situation in Indochina was disseminated on the 17th from the Langley CIA headquarters. Some interesting facts relating to the Lao war were included:

"The most positive thing that can be said about Laos is that it still exists as a non-communist state. The major factor in its survival has been U.S. support. The U.S. pays the salary of all Lao military forces. NVA is now playing the major combat role in Laos.

Hanoi quite clearly considers Laos a less important target than South Vietnam. The communists believe that when they obtain their objective in South Vietnam, Laos will fall into their hands. But as long as they have been able to use [Lao] territory to support the war in South Vietnam-, they have not been willing to pay the costs or run the risks of decisive action in Laos...

The regular Lao forces generally perform poorly in combat. And although Meo guerrillas have fought well, they are battle weary and their losses over the past year or so have exceeded their capability to replace them.

Although the communists have the capability to overrun all of Laos, they probably believe that the situation as it had evolved since 1962 has served their purposes reasonably well. Their current objectives are to remove Vang Pao's forces as a serious military threat, obtain a halt to all U.S bombing and enhance their political position in a reconstituted government..."

MEANWHILE IN MR-1

Despite extraordinary military emphasis accorded the Sam Tong/Long Tieng area, other areas of Laos were not exempt from hostile action. The area north of Luang Prabang, always supremely hazardous for air crews, was one. Road watch observation of Route-19 was an ongoing Agency project there, not only to gather intelligence regarding enemy movement, but also to monitor road construction progress toward Moung La and Moung Sai. The improving logistic artery emanating from the Dien Bien Phu area supplied Pathet Lao and Vietnamese units in the Luang Prabang region from the well-stocked warehouses that had been off limits to U.S air strikes.

During the afternoon of 17 April, H-34 Captains Dwayne Keele and Frank Stergar arrived at the Luang Prabang airstrip to join Don Henthorn and Elmer Munsell in conducting an extraction of thirteen men currently experiencing duress. Station Chief Fred Costs, who had replaced former Customer Doug Swanson, briefed the three crews.

Old timer Bird and Son and CASI pilot Eldon Walker, a Customer favorite, driving a twin-engine Beech Baron and acting as the airborne command post, left first to check the weather and establish contact with the team. The three H-34 crews, escorted by two Lao T-28 pilots, followed not far behind.

As the armada closed on the area, the team leader contacted Walker with bad news. The team was being hotly pursued by enemy forces. Although there was a badly wounded man in the group, he considered the enemy too close to the landing zone for a safe extraction. They were also in the center of very rough terrain that would likely present a problem for landing. Such an admission was highly unusual for a road watch team leader. Normally in such a situation there was no concern for the helicopter crew's well-being--only the urge to "get the hell

out." Now harboring a high opinion of the team leader, the group returned to Luang Prabang determined to make another attempt to extract the men after they moved to a safer area. During debriefing, Costs indicated that Walker would conduct another recon the next day to ascertain the team's status.

The following morning, after a night at the Air America hostel, Dwayne, Don, and Elmer boarded the Baron for a recon of the target area. Because he elected to fly low in denied areas and ignored small arms fire, crews often considered Walker's recons as exciting as the actual extractions.

The team was concealed in twelve-foot elephant grass on the side of a hill, 300 feet below Route-19, where the still-unimproved road crossed the ridgeline. Below the hill lay a river valley where Henthorn and Munsell had received small arms fire the previous week. The team leader indicated that the entire team was exhausted and could proceed no further. Therefore, despite the negative odds, the recovery would have to be attempted at that spot ASAP or not at all. With this in mind, they returned to Luang Prabang.

Fred Costs was considered much easier to work with than Doug Swanson, who tended to be acerbic, and was suspected of withholding critical information during some Special Missions. Anxious to retrieve the entire team, Costs indicated that the Air America men could conduct the mission anyway they desired. Then he began plans to marshal his assets for an immediate extraction.

During the trip north to the area, the T-28 drivers were briefed to conduct bombing and strafing passes on the road while the extraction was in progress. Keele would be the first to land. He would load seven men. Munsell would follow and load the rest. Henthorn would provide SAR coverage.

Keele arrived at altitude over the valley. Remaining as far as possible from the road, he rolled the throttle off and entered autorotation to effect a maximum descent (1,000 to 1,500 feet per minute). Elmer waited ninety seconds and then followed Keele down toward the landing zone.

After marrying the tachometer needles and establishing the correct power setting, Keele landed in the high grass and began loading his men. Given the OK by his Flight Mechanic, he attempted a takeoff, but was too heavy for a normal departure. While Stergar shouted about Elmer, Dwayne elected to make a jump takeoff. He rolled on 2800 RPM while adding power and then, trading rotor inertia for lift, popped the collective up until the RPM read a dangerously low 2400 RPM. The method worked. While skimming the high grass, he headed for the river valley and lowered the collective to obtain safe RPM and sufficient speed to climb out.

When Elmer was also safely established airborne in cruise configuration, they headed south to Luang Prabang satisfied that they had performed an excellent job.

CHINESE ROADS

"During the 1950s the Chinese began a number of road construction projects near the borders of their southwestern frontier provinces. Several new roads in Kwangsi and Yunnan provinces were extended to the Indochina border at that time, thus facilitating the logistical support to the Viet Minh in their fight against the French. Significantly, in 1968 the Chinese extended the K'un-ming-Meng-la road to Moung Sai, Laos, and they are now lengthening it to Moung Houn, from which it may eventually reach Pak Beng, a settlement on the Mekong River close to the area of insurgency in Thailand."

Further west of Luang Prabang, construction of the all-weather road from China down the Beng Valley toward the Mekong continued to cause consternation in the Lao government. Even the King objected.

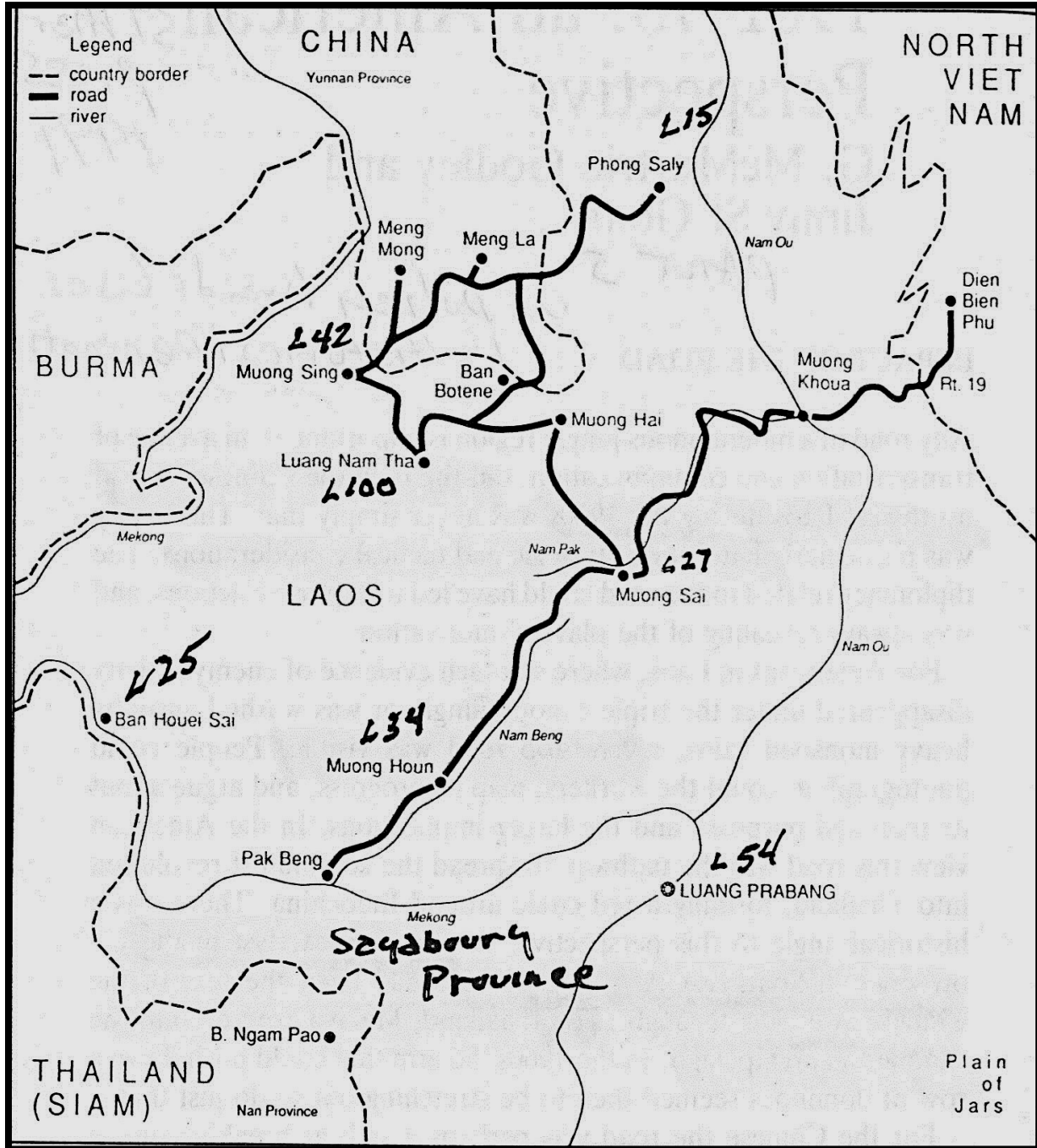
The situation was ironic. The Lao government opened Pandora's Box during an early 1960s confused leftist-neutralist-rightist political period, when then Neutralist Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, who was attempting to reestablish his neutralist stance, visited Peking during April 1961 and solicited an aid pact with Chinese officials that included road construction from Yunnan Province into the remote northwestern portion of Laos. Then, during January of 1962, a formal inter-government agreement was signed to allow the Chinese to build a road from Meng La east into Phong Saly Province and the capital of the same name.

After the Geneva Accords of 1962 on Laos were signed, Souvanna dispatched his defense minister, Phoumi Nosavan, to China where the rightist general signed the final road building agreement.

When the road was completed to Phong Saly in the spring of 1963 Chinese construction teams departed for home. Unauthorized road construction continued to Moung Sing and Nam Tha in Laos, but the work was not publicized. Then further work largely ceased for two and a half years while laborers turned their attention to helping repair the infrastructure destroyed by American bombing...until LBJ halted bombing in North Vietnam.

Road construction then resumed to Moung Sai.

The issue surfaced from time to time, and as late as 1968 Souvanna unrealistically announced that he could see no harm in a Chinese road that was built no further south than Moung Houn. But when the road turned north toward Route-19, confusion



The projected Chinese road system in northwestern Laos.
 Map prepared by Mia Jacob for the Godley and St Goar article, 286;
 Lima Sites added by the Author.

reigned in U.S intelligence quarters, RLG, and the Thai Government as to actual Chinese intentions.

When survey and construction work continued south of Moung Sai, the communist objective became abundantly clear to all. An all-weather road like the ones to the north would be built along the Beng River to the Mekong. To confirm this assessment, the Pathet Lao, et. al. began efforts to dislodge FAR units from close to the construction sites.

Then, toward the end of January 1970, alarmed over current evidence that the road would be extended to Pak Beng on the Mekong River, and pressure from concerned Thai officials mounted, Souvanna Phouma requested the Agency employ special guerrilla unit troops to disrupt and block road survey progress past Moung Houn, which had been photographed and revealed during air reconnaissance missions. He also sanctioned Lao T-28 strikes south of Moung Houn.

The sensitive matter was referred to President Nixon's Washington Special Action Group (WSAG) for consultation and advice. Cognizant that there were huge numbers of Chinese troops available for deployment, which leaders of the government were not loath to use, as they had done in Korea, several low-key options were proposed to show intent and perhaps deter further road development. These included: inserting a sizeable Lao force between Moung Houn and Pak Beng using Air America helicopters. This unit would be supported by T-28 pilots and USAF air if needed; or a small hit-and-run guerrilla operation to mine, attack personnel, and facilities; or employing USAF tactical air on targets south of Moung Houn; or, finally, no military action in lieu of political negotiations.

The group's consensus centered on and was sent to the White House, recommending the small unit option. After due diligence,

within a week, the President agreed to the WSAG proposal, but desired to add U.S. tactical air to the equation.

By 19 March the situation had changed. The Lao government appeared less concerned about Chinese road construction south of Moung Houn and threat to the lower Beng Valley. All helicopter airlift was needed for the defense and possible evacuation of Long Tieng. Therefore, Henry Kissinger forwarded a memorandum to Secretary Laird and Rogers stating that former plans to attack the Chinese road work south of Moung Houn was tabled, and that the State and Defense Department heads should apprise the President when they considered conditions right to justify an offensive.

A few days later a MACV assessment reached the White House indicating:

"...There is evidence that the Chinese are consolidating their position along the road network and are determined to protect and expand their road system..."

Chinese objectives appear to be both tactical and strategic in the short term, to demonstrate support for North Vietnam's war effort in Laos; and over the long haul, counter U.S. and Soviet influence in Laos.

..."the road construction represents a determined Chinese effort to consolidate and extend her influence in a traditional area of Chinese interest."

In mid-April, with the help of aerial recon, Agency analysts concluded that for the remaining dry season, road construction was currently focused on completing all-weather road segments underway instead of expanding the artery south past Moung Houn.

However, there was a large increase of AAA gun positions just north of the village.

The road under construction northeast of Moung Sai toward Route-19 was vehicle operative for fourteen miles beyond Moung La. Harsh terrain was the limiting factor in accelerated progress.

Other trails to the east were being widened by hand only, so it was not believed that a major artery to the Nam Bac headquarters would be completed this year.

MR-3

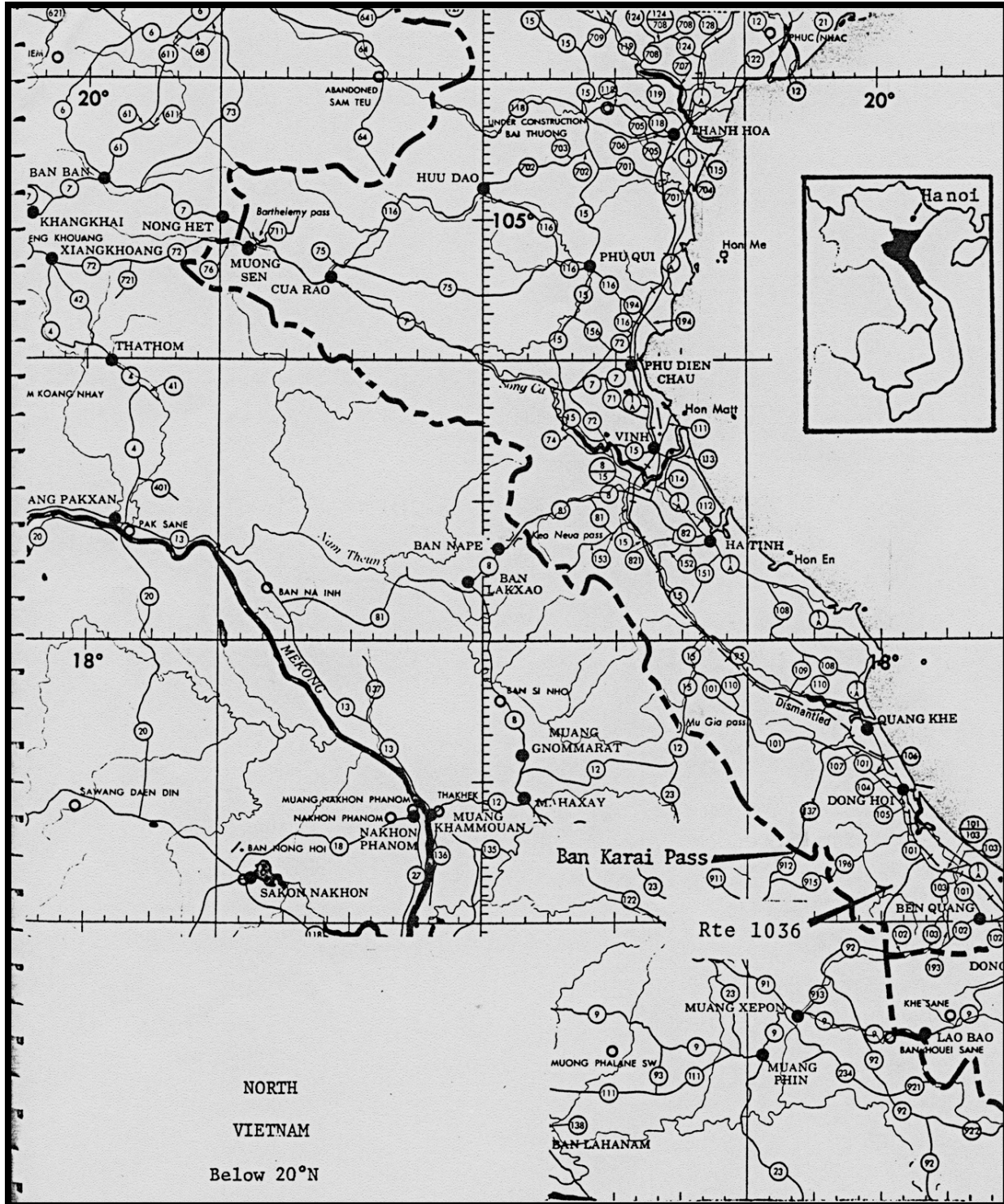
Territorial gains by several FAR/SGU battalions toward the end of 1969 to the east of Savannakhet at Tangvay (LS-299), and to Moung Phalane Southwest (LS61A), generally held through January.

During February enemy activity increased on the government held areas around Ban Tangvay (Tang Vai), located forty-five miles south-southeast of Savannakhet on Route-111, leading to Moung Phine. Then in March, when the Long Tieng base was under severe pressure, two frontline SGU battalions from Military Region Three were recalled from the field and flown to Site-20A for defensive. With SGU support diminished at Tangvay, the area was abandoned and Site-61A came under pressure.

Toward mid-April the situation reversed when an SGU battalion, previously sent to Military Region Four to help clear the Bolovens Plateau, returned to Military Region Three. After being lifted to Site-61A, the battalion moved southeast back into Tangvay to reestablish frontline positions.

With enemy pressure somewhat diminished and good progress establishing forward lines north of Long Tieng, our Bells resumed road watch missions in eastern Military Region Three.

Early on the 19th, accompanied by another Bell crew, Jack Knotts, Jay Meyers, and I launched for Savannakhet in PFJ to conduct a Special Mission. Since the infil was scheduled for the



A portion of Military Region Three. Seen in the lower right corner Route-111 leads to Mung Phine. Ban Tangvay (LS-299) is located approximately at the point where Route-91 intersects 111. Mung Phalane Southeast (LS-61A) is located northwest. Our road watch team mission was conducted northwest of Route-12 and Mugia Pass.

afternoon, we first worked some missions supplying SGU troops to the east.

After landing at the launch point, we were briefed on the long-range mission. It entailed delivering a Mugia Pass road watch team to Phou Honkai (WE653676), a broad, flat mesa type structure over ninety miles north-northwest. Located twelve miles northwest of Route-12 and three miles west of the North Vietnamese border, the remote landing zone was an area base camp we had used previously and a very difficult one for the enemy to access. Although several border passes had been developed over the years and were available to shunt supplies to South Vietnam, perhaps since the change of Cambodian governments in March and the closure of the Port of Sihanoukville (Kompong Som), there was renewed emphasis on opening formerly disused passes.

Halfway to the target, our escort A-1 pilots joined us, and with their welcome assistance we completed the mission without incident. Working at our extreme combat range, we landed at Savannakhet with a minimum fuel state. After taking on sufficient fuel, we departed late for the return trip to Udorn. April sunset was about 1822 hours, and still twilight when I began logging forty minutes night.

LTC MR-2

Monday morning, I was back at Long Tieng flying solo in 96W with Casio as my Flight Mechanic. We continued moving men and munitions to Skyline and the fire support howitzer base there.

After six long days on the flight schedule, with the Company attempting to adhere somewhat to FAA regulations regarding crew duty and flight time, I was accorded two days off to rest.

Mike Jarina and Bennie Shaffer, after arriving at The Alternate on Wednesday, were dispatched north to Bouam Long, a

site enemy units were still harassing with DK-82, 57mm recoilless rifle, and 105mm howitzer fire. Since terrified refugees continued arriving from outlying villages, Mike shuttled refugees between LS-32 and Phou Cum (LS-50) and San Pa Ka (LS-33). From these sites they would be transported south by small STOL planes to Long Tieng, where they would be categorized by ethnic preferences and distributed to various sites.

En route south to Udorn, Mike concluded a busy day with a stop at Ban Son. By the time he chocked in, he had logged forty-seven landings.

The Site-72 valley was certainly not quiet. Vang Pao had ordered that objective and the Long Mat Mountain to the north seized to create even greater enemy separation from Long Tieng. Consequently, as the Nam Yu contingent and another battalion moved through the Tha Tham Valley, supported by air, the Pakse SGU battalion moved up the slopes of Long Mat, intent on establishing a foothold on the southern portion.

On the 23rd, Jack Knotts, Dave Crowell, and I crewed 13F to The Alternate. During the day we supported troops in and around the Site-72 Valley, while T-28 pilots bombed top portions of Phou Long Mat ahead of our advancing troops. Shot at there in March while attempting a wounded pickup, I felt uncomfortable, but was assured that the area had been cleared and the strip reclaimed. After several trips to positions around the area, this appeared to be the case.

Blocking incursions from Vietnamese troops reputedly lurking in the Ban Na area, our men had established a forward outpost in a forested karst located in a heavily vegetated area a few miles west of the airstrip. Trips from the loading area at Long Tieng entailed delivering sling loads of boxed recoilless rifle, mortar rounds and other ammunition to the position.

Jutting upward from the rising valley, the karst was not particularly high, but commanded ground to the west. Sharp peaks on the perimeter afforded no clearance to land. Therefore, long line loads had to be delivered directly over the position from an out of ground effect hover. This was no problem if prevailing winds provided extra lift and the loads were relatively light.

After completing two shuttles, I commenced another slow approach to the small pinnacle. After maneuvering and achieving a stable hover over the drop zone, I activated the release button. Nothing happened. The load was gone. It was strange. If the light load of recoilless rifle rounds had prematurely released due to an electrical malfunction, I never felt a separation. Assuming anything west of the karst was bad guy territory and not wanting to takeoff in that direction and possibly expose the ship to enemy fire, I reversed course and headed toward the airstrip to check the cargo hook. En route, the commanding officer at the landing zone called saying that while making an approach, a 12.7mm round fired from maximum range had hit the load, pulverizing and disintegrating everything. This was difficult to fathom, for none of us heard or felt anything. Still, the fluke incident was sobering, for the ammunition could have exploded on impact or a slightly higher directed round wrecked the "family jewels" and caused me to sing in an off-key tenor voice.

For obvious reasons, I elected not to return to that landing zone and we completed the day servicing other positions.

Friday morning Ellis Emery, Dave Crowell, and I flew 13F east to Thakhet for a Special Mission in the Nape Pass area (see previous map). Like Mugia Pass, the Route-8 artery was being closely watched for renewed or accelerated traffic since the Cambodian seaborne-ground logistic line to South Vietnam was shut down. Our two-aircraft mission departed LS-40A for Phou Ca

Cho (VE998342), fifty miles north of Thakhet, fifteen miles north of Lak Sao on Route-8, and eight miles northwest of Ban Nape. Unlike Mugia, probably serviced more by H-34 pilots, this road watch team base was not familiar to me.

After refueling at Thakhet, we were on the ground at Udorn before dark.

THE LYCOMING T-5313A TURBOSHAFT ENGINE

The T-5311 (known in the trade as dash 11 engines) gas turbine engine, first used on the Bell 205 helicopter, greatly improved performance, especially when compared to UH-34D reciprocating engine specifications. The advantages were a far less power-to-weight ratio, lower fuel consumption, and lower maintenance and operating costs. However, like all helicopters I had flown, the engines were still underpowered when working at elevation in the mountains. This required carrying appropriate loads commensurate to conditions like density altitude for the high pads. Pilot technique was still applicable, but the Bell was not configured like the Sikorsky, or conducive to pilot technique that allowed proficient pilots to carry out-of-the-book loads to high altitude. Therefore, a few Bell pilots compensated by drooping rotor RPM during landing to allow for "miscalculated" load weight or adverse winds. Some were able to operate in this manner, others dinged the machine.

This power deficiency was rectified by the U.S. Army when an advanced shaft horsepower engine, the T-5313A engine, was manufactured and installed in UH-1H production models at the Bell factory. Delivery of the upgraded helicopter began in September 1967. Of course, the Army had first priority, and we had to wait for the engines to become available for our use. This was not all that bad for any new product development-it

allowed sufficient time for problems inherent in any new machinery to surface and be corrected.

This change came to fruition for Air America pilots in April 1970. In preparation for Bell 205-13 engine upgrades, Wayne Knight flew with Army Warrant Officer, Ted Untalan, an ARMA attaché UH-1H pilot, on 4 April on an unofficial familiarization and checkout. ⁶

Papa Foxtrot Juliet was the first Bell 205 to undergo the engine conversion (the dash 13 engine was built specifically for the UH-1H helicopter). Retrofits were accomplished as engines arrived and our few remaining 205s entered maintenance. Since the dash 13 engine was the same size lengthwise as the dash 11 engine, there was no problem with installation.

By the 23rd, Juliet was on the flight line for a functional test flight (FCF).

Seniority was not an issue in training, and the following day Wayne, with Jay Meyers crewing, trained Phil Goddard, Dick Elder, and Robbie Robertson (I never heard anyone call Robbie Orville) in the T-5313A engine. Phil, who had a management slot, could then help familiarize other Bell pilots.

By Saturday morning it was Mike Jarina's and my turn for upgrading and introduction to the new engine. Along with Wayne and Jay Meyers, I flew the aircraft one hour locally, including ground run time. I was told the engine was "flat rated," to produce more torque (power) in the mountains. This feature had a distinct advantage over the -1100 engine that was de-rated at sea level and would allow only a certain power demand at altitude. Now, engine "topping" and pilot technique while

⁶As I learned later, when a helicopter chief pilot for a FAA 135 operation, in any organization, the boss has the option to train himself.

landing at high pads would take a backseat to power. It would also preclude the propensity for some pilots to overload and droop rotor RPM during landings. I would have to experience this new normal first-hand to totally believe it.

One issue was that it now required closer pilot attention not to exceed a precise torque setting (Q) at a specific altitude. A chart was placarded on the console providing information for this.

THE INFAMOUS GOVERNOR TRIP SYSTEM

Another potential problem was discussed during the checkout procedure. While bench testing the engine at the Lycoming factory, there was a propensity for compressor blades to eject through the engine casing during induced high side governor malfunctions. Therefore, to obtain FAA accreditation for civilian 205 models, a specially modified overspeed trip system was designed and incorporated into the governor system to sense such a condition and prevent catastrophic turbine wheel overspeed, which also might cause the rotor system to fail. With the sensing unit activated, during an overspeed event, the overspeed governor valve would send a signal to the fuel control unit (FCU) to reduce fuel flow by half or more. The retrofit was not an issue for new production line models, but our ships required some electrical wiring from the engine to a black-headed circuit breaker in the front right overhead cockpit panel. ⁷

With due respect to Murphy's Law of confusion, it appeared the "fix" had the potential to create more of a predicament than an actual problem itself. Just the logic of the fuel control

⁷ The shaft of the circuit breaker was white and definitive when placed in the disabled position.

limiting fuel flow to minimum was a little chilling to a line pilot, particularly should this occur during crucial landing or takeoff operations in the mountains. The overspeed trip system could be deactivated by pulling the circuit breaker out. However, attempting to abide by FAA regulations and as a means to alleviate accidents, the initial and official Company policy was to always use the system.

The Bell helicopter had been in the U.S Army inventory a long time. Several experienced and high time Bell pilots were in our group, and no one had ever heard of, or read about, an overspeed so violent as to shed a rotor head or main rotor blades. Such a situation was considered as rare as to be inconsequential during our operations.

I complied with the directive at first, but others chose to disarm the system and never used it. At one point after installation, Lycoming representatives cautioned about leaving the system engaged when working in proximity to high-voltage power lines. Armed with this information, and a possibility that stray ions might prematurely sense an overspeed and trigger engine shutdown, the Maintenance Department installed blue shielding around all the wiring. It did not work.

The issue all came to a head when Dick Elder experienced a trip system malfunction while hovering on top of Skyline Ridge. As designed by engineers, the FCU was restricted to half flow and Dick was committed to a controlled crash. After that incident, use of the system became optional. On the one hand, it was a relief not worrying about a premature reduction in fuel flow. On the other hand, now we had to contend with the potential of a rare overspeed. We were also given the alternative of pulling the circuit breaker during landing and takeoff to preclude an event we could not handle, but were still encouraged to employ the system during cruise flight.

As Chief of Technical Services Jack Forney recalled:

"There was some interaction between the unit and the fuel control unit (FCU) had us running for answers. The problem was that the overspeed governor had the ability of reducing fuel flow or shutting the fuel flow off if it sensed and overspeed. The question was how accurate was the sensing?"

Over time we gained confidence in the upgraded engine and there were no more overload accidents.

On the 26th and 27th Wayne took Papa Foxtrot Juliet into the field for an engine shakedown before releasing the aircraft to line pilots. ⁸

The day after my dash 13 checkout I returned to Site 20A with Flight Mechanic Terry Dunn in Papa Foxtrot Gulf. Mike Jarina also went upcountry in 13F with Casio. Emphasis still centered on supplying forward lines. Attesting to the short round trips to pads, Mike recorded eighty-two landings. It was a long day, with both of us logging night time.

My last LTC occurred on the 27th, when Ken Wood, Terry Dunn, and I worked out of Long Tieng. With almost a hundred hours logged, except for the long days and little rest, it had been a rewarding month.

UDORN

"I just received your letter Mom and I hope that you were not worried too much. I have been working since the 15th and feel pretty good now. We are working quite hard as we take off at 0630 [after sunrise] and don't get back to Udorn until dark. One compensation is that I get to see more of the family.

⁸ EW Knight Emails, 10/27/00, 10/29/00--his involvement with the -13 engine.
Jack Forney Email.

Things are still pretty grim upcountry, but we have made some gains. It seems to be quiet now, but I worry about that.

Sam Tong is ruined, with most of the village burned or destroyed. Our hostel took some mortar hits but is in use as a CP [command post] at present. The hospital and warehouses are completely destroyed. A lot of money was put into the complex and now lost. The enemy still mortars the strip now and then to let us know that they are still there. I don't know how it will all turn out, but it should be interesting."

04/28/70 Letter Home.

We were planning a trip home in July. Because of crew scheduling and the ongoing conflict, it would be limited to about six weeks compared to past home leaves. I had a lot of requests for the folks at home including borrowing a high chair, crib, and playpen. I had objectives of visiting Mexico and Steamboat Springs to assess the business. Tuie wanted us to visit a relative in Boston. We also wanted to spend some time at the Jersey shore if possible. Factoring in travel time both ways and recovering from jet lag at home that could take up to a week to dissipate, my plans were ambitious.

Planning for the rainy season and the associated annual flooding, the landlord had more cement placed around the house. I did not believe the effort would help that much and asked if he would cement the entire front yard so the kids could play with their rolling stock there. He claimed this would be too expensive, and refused my offer to advance him funds. The roof still leaked, so we would have that problem also. I was not happy with his non-compliance and would have moved, but with a bad housing market, we had little choice than to remain in place. Besides, with the enemy knocking on our gates, who knew how long the job in Laos would last?

Jarina continued flying upcountry until the end of the month. On the 28th, logging fifty-one landings, he worked the Site-20A area in 13F with Bobbie Barrow.

On the final day Mike, Robbie Robertson and Andy Anderson worked at Phu Cum and Bouam Long moving refugees and supplying outposts. They stopped at the Ban Son refugee site on the way back to Udorn.

MR-2 STATUS QUO?

Vietnamese military history records Campaign-139 officially diminishing as of 25 April. After our troops captured much of Phu Long Mat, the majority of enemy forces slowly and quietly began departing the battlefield. There was always next year. Covering the withdrawal, selected enemy units remained in place between Long Tieng and the Plain of Jars to keep us honest.

Chief of Station Vientiane Larry Devlin, a "hands on type," visited Long Tieng on 29 April to confer with Unit Chief, Vince Shields, his Case Officers, and General Vang Pao. The issue of introducing a third Thai battalion arose, when Vang Pao suggested the Thai could replace Meo units manning the defense lines northeast of Sam Tong and northeast of Site-72. These fresh troops could release his irregular fighters for what they were best equipped-to move forward, engage and eject the Vietnamese in the Ban Na area, denying them a forward logistics base from which to further harass Long Tieng. The issue of introducing another Thai battalion for static defense was raised at a Washington Special Action Group meeting on 1 May.

Informed of the situation, a day or so later Ambassador Godley reviewed the military situation in Military Region Two and concluded that another Thai battalion was indeed required at Long Tieng. The matter was forwarded to Washington for discussion and support.

In the meantime, a second artillery position consisting of two 105mm and two 155mm howitzers, and called Zebra fire support base (FSB), was established to the north on Romeo Ridge.

CAMBODIAN COMPLICATIONS

During March, drastic changes occurred in Cambodia that would soon present serious consequences in southern Laos.

Ten years before, powerful Prince Norodom Sihanouk, a brilliant politician and manipulator, had become Chief of State in "neutral" Cambodia. ⁹ "Bending with the wind," like other Asian leaders under stress during the early sixties, unconvinced that the U.S. had the staying power to win the Second Indochina War against the North Vietnamese communists, he negotiated a secret trade agreement with North Vietnamese leaders, while at the same time currying favor with the U.S. In exchange for purchases of rice at high prices, the so-called neutralist leader allowed Vietnamese and National Liberation Front Viet Cong in South Vietnam the use of Port Sihanoukville for military weapons delivery, and then sanctioned lucrative transport agreements throughout his country to communist base camps on the eastern border. ¹⁰ First deliveries commenced during October 1966. Some of these off-limits enclaves were located twenty miles west of the border. Employed as secure areas to plan and launch attacks on South Vietnamese bases, they also served for R&R, training sites, hospitals, weapons and ammunition depots, air strips, prisoner-of-war enclosures, and fallback sites should that become necessary.

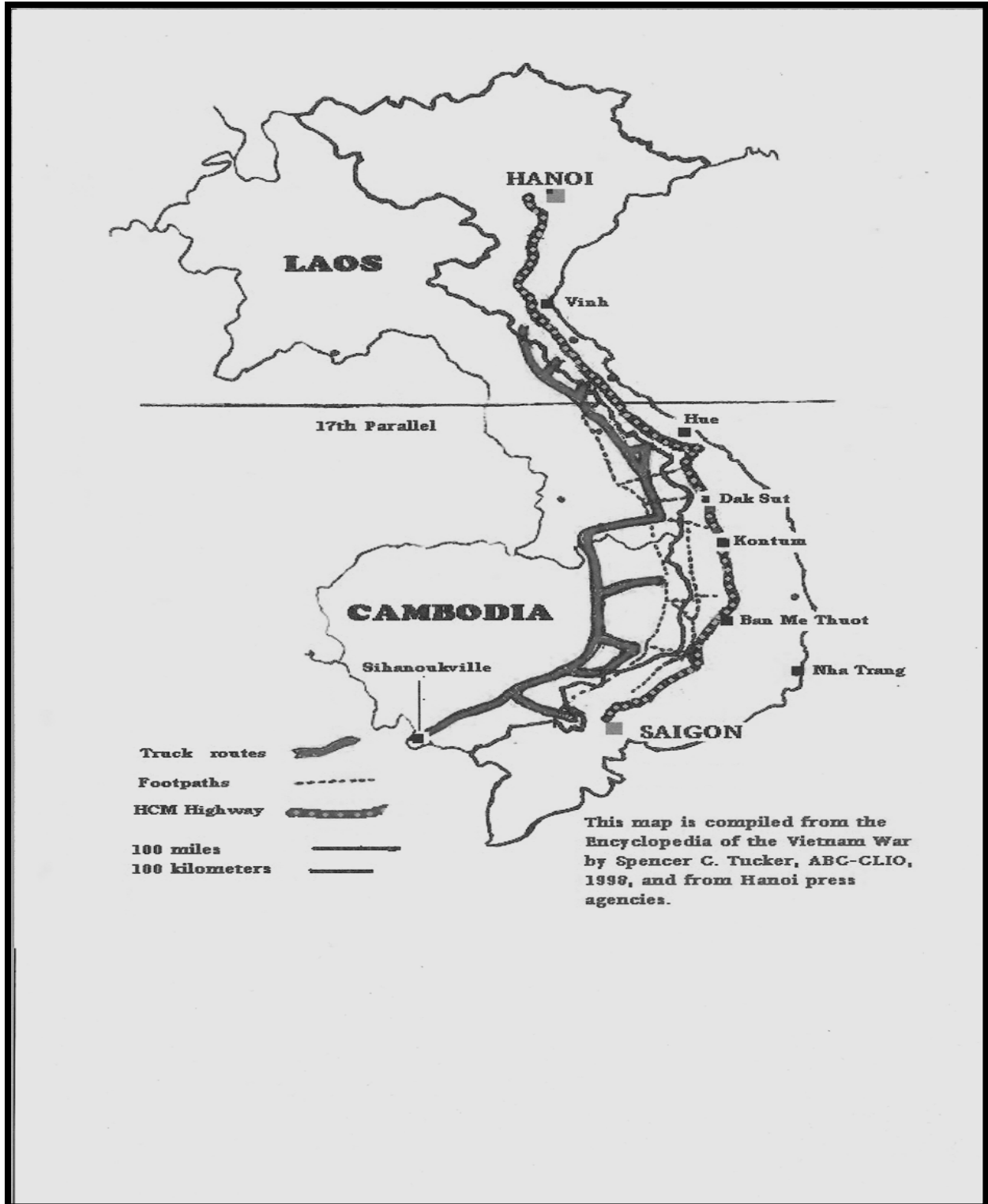
⁹ Neutral seemed to be an adequate term to describe the wink-wink policy employed among weak and struggling countries.

¹⁰ Richard Nixon, 498. There were estimates that eighty-five percent of heavy arms used by the communists in South Vietnam came by sea through the port of Sihanoukville.



Cambodia and part of Indochina. The Parrot's Beak is seen pointing toward the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon.

CHECO



North Vietnamese all-weather supply routes through Military Regions Three and Four in Laos leading to South Vietnam and eastern bases in Cambodia. Also, along Routes-110 and 96 south and east of Attopeu in Laos to Viet Cong forces in South Vietnam.

Possessing a weak military capability against an estimated 40,000 battle hardened Viet Cong and Vietnamese troops, in a largely jungle covered country, Sihanouk ignored these Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army (also known as PAVN, the People's Army of Vietnam) sanctuaries on the eastern border of Cambodia. ¹¹ Despite overtures by both USG and South Vietnamese governments to cease the practices, the not-so-tacit support continued unabated.

Like numerous enemy sanctuaries and support base camps in southeastern Laos, extra-territorial enemy refuges in "neutral" countries were considered dirty pool, not to be tolerated by the Allies, and reprisals were sanctioned. By 1968 many clandestine cross border operations by Allied teams had well defined the extent of the enemy logistic and support base camps in Cambodia. But even with this important information, international geopolitical concerns and the administration change in Washington prevented immediate action. Conducted by civilians from afar, it was that kind of war.

After Richard Nixon was elected U.S. President, the previous failure to act in accordance with military logic and common sense in Southeast Asia drastically changed. The much-publicized Nixon Doctrine specified a policy of what was called Vietnamization, a process calculated to allow time and provide security for the Vietnamese Army (ARVN) and Vietnamese Air Force

¹¹ Richard Nixon, 449, Sanctuaries: *"The communist sanctuaries in Cambodia were in two main areas. The Parrot's Beak is a sliver of land that pushes into South Vietnam and reaches within thirty-three miles of Saigon. A particularly strong ARVN...force was stationed of the border in this area. Our intelligence reports indicated that the heaviest communist concentration was in another border area, the Fishhook, a thin curving piece of Cambodia territory jutting right into the heart of South Vietnam, about fifty miles northwest of Saigon. This was the primary area of operation for what intelligence referred to as COSVN-the Central Office of South Vietnam. COSVN was the communists' floating command post of military headquarters, supplies, food, and medical facilities."*

(VNAF) to strengthen their forces and prepare to eventually take full control of the war. In order to provide a cover for U.S. withdrawal from ground combat in South Vietnam, a decision was made to bomb enemy camps and supply depots inside Cambodia. Implementing this was considered essential to forestall enemy offensives in South Vietnam while the country strengthened its military forces.

Therefore, on 18 March 1969, forty-eight clandestine B-52 strikes commenced on enemy base camps. Similar missions continued secretly and periodically for fourteen months. Approved and directed by the White House and members of the National Security Council, these bombing missions were classified top secret to forestall knowledge of the action from the American public, U.S. Congress, and even most of USAF officials.

That spring, with the American portion of the Indochina War programmed to wind down in South Vietnam, and with Sihanouk's assent, USG diplomatic relations in Phnom Penh were slowly restored.¹²

Sihanouk's vacillating ideologies, wavering loyalties, and pressure from North Vietnamese politicians eventually caused his downfall. The prince was in the habit of yearly taking long vacations in France. Planning this holiday and meetings in the Soviet Union, he left Phnom Penh during January 1970.

By 11 March, while the prince was still absent from the country, political turmoil and unrest prevailed in Phnom Penh. On that day, thousands of demonstrators sacked embassies of both the communist (NVN) and the Provisional Revolutionary Government (VC).

¹² Sihanouk severed diplomatic relations with Thailand in 1961, South Vietnam in 1963, and with the United States in 1965.

Taking advantage of Sihanouk's absence, on 12 March Deputy Prime Minister Matak cancelled the former trade pact with North Vietnam. Prime Minister, Lieutenant General Lon Nol sealed the Sihanoukville Port to further Vietnamese shipments, and announced that the government intended to pursue an actual neutral stance. Then he unrealistically ordered all Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces out of the country within seventy-two hours. When this did not occur, on the 18th, the Cambodian Army surrounded the capital influencing the National Assembly to convene and withdraw all remaining political support for Sihanouk. During the bloodless coup, power was transferred to General Lon Nol, who declared a state of emergency and suspended some constitutional articles pertaining to civil rights.

A CIA Bulletin revealed:

"Sihanouk is returning to Cambodia to reassert his authority in the wake of unprecedented attacks on the Vietnamese communist embassies in Phnom Penh. The sacking of Provisional Revolutionary Government diplomatic installations by students caps a period of growing anti-communist sentiment and has produced the most serious crisis to date in Sihanouk's relations with Hanoi and the Viet Cong.

No doubt the attacks, which protested the presence of North Vietnamese communists on Cambodian territory and the forthcoming visit of Vietnamese Prime Minister Phan Van Dong, were government inspired. The assaults in the capital were preceded and followed by anti-Vietnamese demonstrations in several provinces. Attacks received the unanimous support to the Cambodian legislature, which passed a declaration asking the government to take all measures necessary immediately to solve the problem of Viet Cong infiltration.

Sihanouk has curtailed his scheduled visits to Prague, Moscow, and Peking and is returning to Cambodia to call for a

reformation, asking the people and the army to choose between himself and those who organized the sieges on the embassies on 11 March.

Sihanouk's decision to return is a sign he interprets these events as a strong challenge to his authority. Sihanouk and the government have been at odds for some time. Although Sihanouk has led the criticism of Vietnamese activities in Cambodia, he has taken some pains to avoid pressing the communists too far.

It is still not clear what government leaders hoped to achieve by the attacks. Until now the government's strategy has been to limit Sihanouk's power slowly and carefully. Much will depend on how hard Sihanouk presses them and if anti-Sihanouk forces can count on firm and continuing support from their members."

During successive days, displaying displeasure over the coup, the communists instituted measures to secure all major supply routes to their base camps. In addition, they assaulted a Cambodian Army outpost. The attack was thwarted, but marked the first time a Cambodian commanding officer requested and received assistance from U.S. and South Vietnamese assets.

Further stirring the domestic pot, supported by the communists, Sihanouk requested an armed opposition to Lon Nol and formation of a United National Front of Kampuchea.

Just after Sihanouk's removal from high office, civilian and military officials in Washington and Saigon recognized a prime opportunity to eliminate enemy sanctuaries in Cambodia that had been plaguing U.S. operations in South Vietnam for years. Commensurate with the situation at the end of March, a contingency plan was dusted off and forwarded to the JCS for consideration. The President elected to act and invade the border areas.

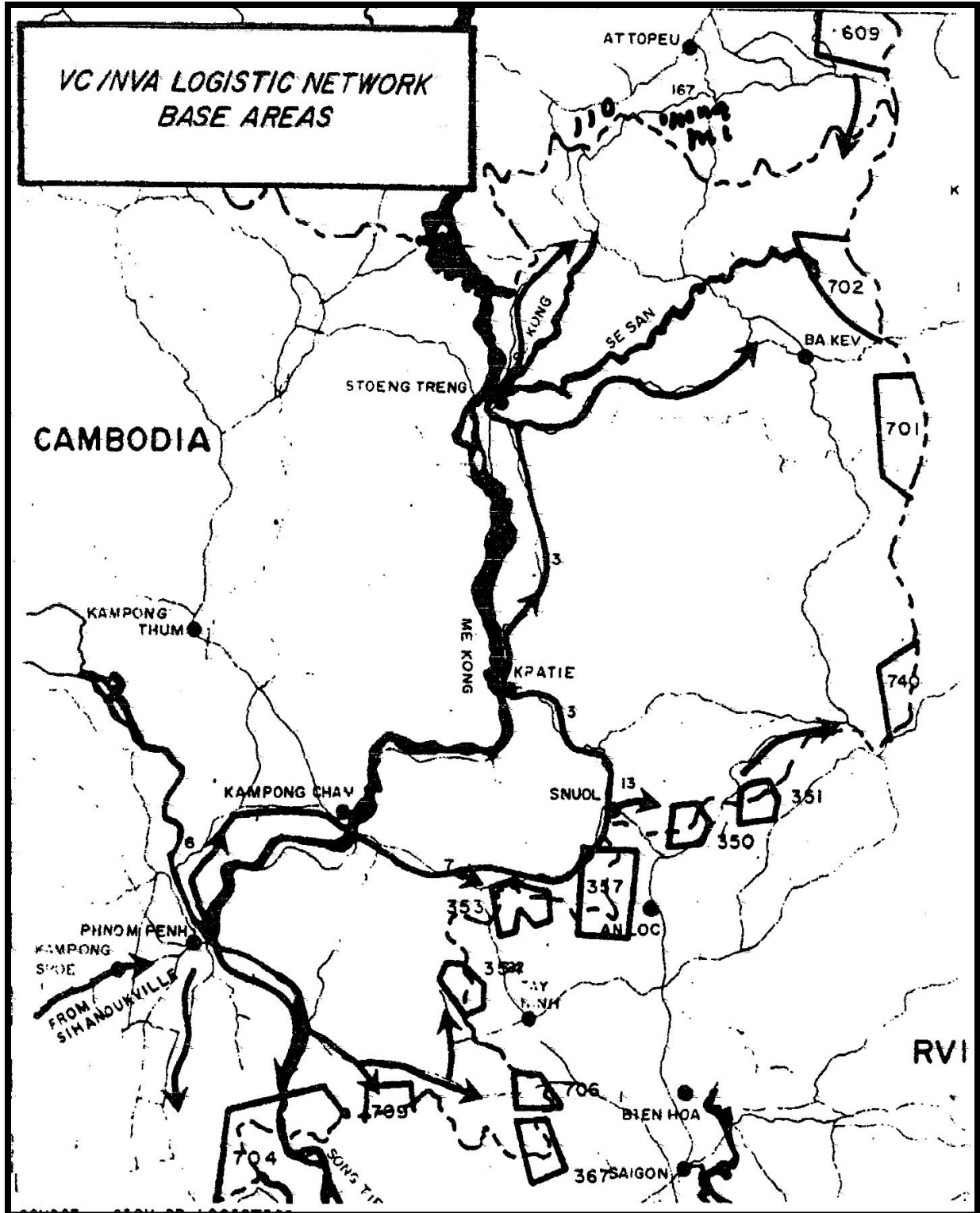
South Vietnamese leaders did not hesitate to move. Overt cross border actions soon commenced. On 28 March, following high level discussions with the new Cambodian government, a force of South Vietnamese soldiers, supported by U.S. helicopter gunship pilots, invaded a communist-controlled portion of Cambodia. The operation was deemed successful, stimulating requests for a far greater response. Also, for the first time, the Nixon White House announced that U.S troops were authorized to cross the border if situational conditions warranted.

Following a 13 April appeal by Lon Nol for military aid, the Thai government agreed to assist Cambodia against the communists. Clothing and supplies were provided, in addition to almost two dozen gunboats to patrol the Mekong River border.

During April the battle for the eastern border region accelerated when large ARVN units consisting of 6,000 troops, supported by U.S. tactical air, medevac, and supplies, invaded what was called the "Parrot's Beak." The troops moved through Cambodian provinces to engage the enemy and destroy their bases, supply depots, and primary control headquarters for enemy operations in South Vietnam (COSVN). Although the main Vietnamese headquarters was not eliminated, substantial gains were made. With contingency plans to attack eastern bases devised years before during the Johnson administration, combined U.S and additional South Vietnamese forces would soon follow.

By the end of April, U.S. troops were moving aggressively into Cambodia toward the "Fish Hook." The invasion was supported by F-4, B-52s, and fixed wing gunships.

Lao Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, concerned about the escalation in Cambodia, firmly believed that operations there would motivate increased enemy action in Laos. Looking toward the future, he appealed to communist leaders to reenter serious peace negotiations.



Enemy base camp sanctuaries located along the Cambodian-South Vietnamese border

CHECO

During 30 May, President Nixon gushed on national television that the Cambodian incursion had proved highly successful and would allow further and unimpeded withdrawal of U.S troops from South Vietnam.

"After conferring with General Abrams, I could state that this had been the most successful operation of the Vietnam war. We had already captured almost as much in enemy arms, equipment,ammunition, and food during the past month in Cambodia alone as we had captured in all of Vietnam during all of 1969."

President Nixon later wrote in his memoirs:

"Most important, the Cambodian operation had destroyed the communists' capability of launching a spring offensive against our forces in South Vietnam. Our casualties had dropped from 93 a week in the six months before the operation to 51 per week in the six months after; and the performance of the ARVN had demonstrated that Vietnamization was working..." ¹³

President Nixon indicated on television that he would terminate U.S. ground participation in Cambodia by 30 June. Under constant Congressional pressure, leaving several divisions of ARVN and FANK (Cambodian Armed Forces) to mop up, he met this deadline, but not before the joint operations had penetrated twenty-three miles inside Cambodia, destroying or capturing forty percent of the enemy ability to conduct war.

During the operation there were some heavy contacts with the enemy. However, major enemy units were forewarned of impending air and ground attacks and had relocated west. ¹⁴ Only token forces were left to defend against the invader's rolling attacks.

¹³ Richard Nixon, 467.

¹⁴ Spies, even in the highest places in Saigon headquarters, were always a concern during the war.

Deemed an overwhelming success for our side, tactical air and ground forces killed or disabled 11,562 enemy. From 204 sizeable caches, rice stores were captured that could feed 40,000 troops for a year. Enough small arms and crew-served weapons were captured or destroyed that would have equipped and supported dozens of Viet Cong battalions. Since the enemy generally stockpiled six months food and ammunition in Cambodia and it took considerable time and effort to move provisions from North Vietnam through Laos to their destination, it was concluded that with the loss of the seaborne arrangement and despite the presence of Lao base supply camps, the overall supply system would require a fifty percent expansion. Thus, because of the forthcoming monsoon season it would take several months to begin replenishing the lost materiel. To reinforce the supposition of a requirement for new and improved supply lines, in the months following the cross border operation, U.S. intelligence determined by studying captured bills of lading that almost ninety percent of the war materiel used by the enemy in South Vietnam was funneled through the port of Sihanoukville.

At the time of U.S. disengagement in Cambodia Senate members voted for the first time in the midst of a war to limit presidential executive power. Funds were denied:

"to retain U.S. troops in Cambodia after 1 July or to supply military advisors, mercenaries or to conduct any combat activity in the air above Cambodia in direct support of Cambodian forces' without congressional approval."

The amendment failed to pass a vote in the House of Representatives. This stimulated President Nixon to commit the U.S in aiding the Lon Nol government with funding and military equipment.

ATTOPEU, LAOS

"To expand and protect the [logistic] trail network, NVA thought it necessary to eliminate any possible threat which could be posed by RLA forces at Attopeu and Saravane."

General Soutchay Vongsavanh.

Separated into two countries by signers of the Geneva Accords of 1954 (USG dissented) and despairing of elections to achieve a timely transition reunifying the two Vietnams, toward the end of 1959 communist North Vietnamese leaders elected to reunite the north and south by the force of arms. To effect this policy and increase support to the surrogate National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NFL or Viet Cong), troops were first channeled south across the 17th parallel and then clandestinely through primitive eastern Lao jungle byways used by Viet Minh units during the French occupation. To develop this logistic system into a viable LOC, the 559 Transportation Group was formed. The venture was named the Troung Son Strategic Supply Route (Ho Chi Minh Trail by Westerners).

Because of the increasing degree of difficulty traversing jungle footpaths under heavy U.S. bombardment, supplemental logistical support to the Viet Cong in the south arrived by seaborne vessels that included sampans, junks, and large trawlers to remote spots along the extensive eastern coastline. When U.S. forces directly entered the war in 1965, the enemy seaborne logistic pipeline via the Tonkin Gulf was effectively terminated under the auspices of the U.S. Navy. This left the rudimentary eastern Panhandle trail system the preferred supply route to SVN.

U.S. interdiction on the trail system in the Lao Panhandle began in the fall of 1964, but thanks to extraordinary efforts

of the 559 Group, supplies and men continued to move slowly and laboriously south along the Troung Son network.

To increase delivery of enemy goods at minimum risk through another "neutral" and thus far inviolate country, an agreement with Sihanouk to open Port Sihanoukville to communist bloc shipping was implemented and new logistic arteries were developed throughout Cambodia to support the NHL in South Vietnam.

The 1970 Cambodian coup and denial of the Sihanoukville port to communist shipping, plus destruction of border sanctuaries, elicited a potential to create severe disruptions to the enemy war effort in South Vietnam. Consequently, southern Laos became even more important to the enemy for continued infiltration of troops and supplies to both South Vietnam and Cambodia. Deprivation of seaborne assets could only be countered by creating new, and expanding existing all weather Trail LOCs westward in Laos toward more populated regions--areas that USG, fearing civilian collateral damage, was always hesitant to bomb with impunity. Moreover, once cleared of RLG forces, the Bolovens Plateau, the Se Kong, Mekong, and other river systems would provide lengthy, but ample supply routes into Cambodia and eventually into South Vietnam. Such an expansion would necessitate first seizing the government "controlled" provincial capital at Attopeu, located southeast of the Bolovens Plateau, through which ran both Route-16 and the Se Kong.

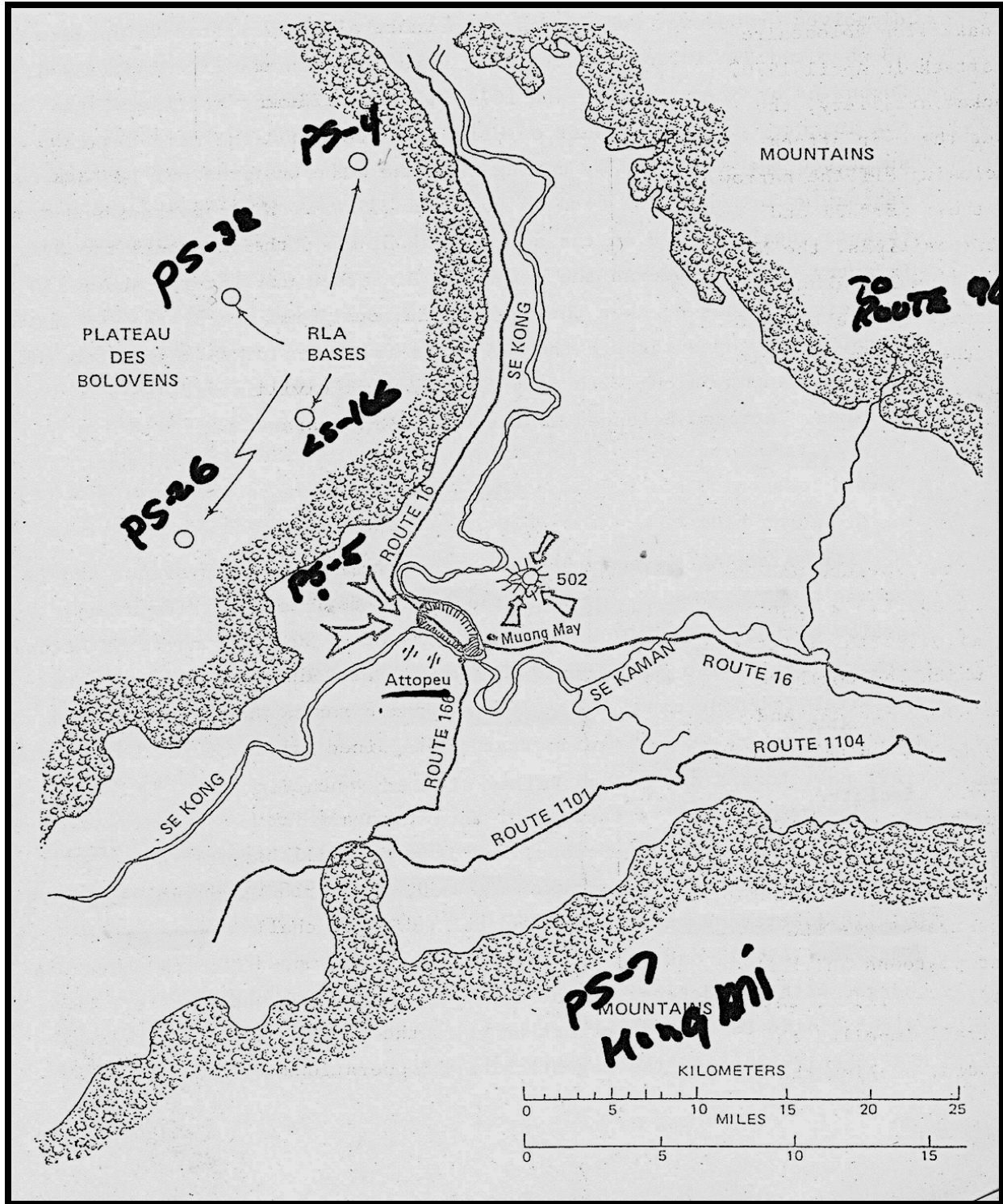
Since 1962 the remote Attopeu garrison had been virtually isolated, depending solely by air supply for its existence. Like other government enclaves in Laos, the presence of government troops was tolerated by the enemy as long as patrolling was not extensive and the rice trade flourished. Deemed suitable, this arrangement continued for years, with only occasional half-hearted enemy attacks, probably initiated to hone the battle

skills of unseasoned Pathet Lao or Vietnamese troops, or dampen any aggressive notions from an overly enthusiastic new FAR commander. The tacit agreement was about to change.

Surrounded since early 1968, the area remained relatively quiet until early April, when pressure on the defenders increased. A fire support base consisting of three 105mm howitzers at PS-26, on the southeastern rim of the Bolovens, overlooked Attopeu and lent some area artillery coverage and moral support to the two-battalions garrisoned there.

During the evening of the 28th, portions of two enemy battalions, supported by mortars and rockets attacked, the 300-man battalion outpost located on commanding ground about two miles northeast of PS-10 on Hill-502. Surprised by an attack from the west, a direction their artillery guns could not be effective, by dawn the position had fallen, with the defenders either dead, captured, or withdrawing. Also, during the night, to preclude artillery support to government troops in the Site-10 area, PS-26 had been overrun. Besieged by heavy mortar fire, the Attopeu commander elected to depart his command. While the enemy continued to ambush retreating units, the colonel, refugees, and troops hiked seven miles northwest to the base of the Bolovens, and then clambered up the steep sides of the plateau, arriving at PS-38 on Thursday the 30th.

Although Attopeu's military importance was considered negligible by the Lao General Staff in the overall defensive picture in Military Region Four, the defeat constituted a negative political and psychological event for the RLG. Moreover, the actual loss of men marked one of the highest government casualty rates of any single previous battle, this in a country where battle losses were traditionally small. It also was the first time the Vietnamese had violated a demarcation line established during the Geneva Accords.



The 29 April 1970 attack on the Attopeu garrison. Our road watch missions took place from the southeastern Bolovens Plateau and Kong Mi to landing zones near Route-110 (marked routes 1101 and 1104) and east of Attopeu.

CHECO Graphic, Vongsavanh, 55.

As reported in a CIA bulletin soon after the attack:

"It is too early to determine whether the attack on Attopeu is the harbinger of an important shift in communist strategy in Laos or represents only the kind of sporadic flareup that has occurred in the south in past years. At a minimum, it is a first reminder of the extreme fragility of the government's position in all of southern Laos, and of the relative ease with which North Vietnamese troops can move west out of the infiltration corridor to strike at a time and place of their own choosing."

Since General Phasouk lacked sufficient assets to effectively drive the enemy back, with the siege of Long Tieng largely considered over and the defensive line holding, Vang Pao authorized the return of one previously loaned SGU battalion to Military Region Four. Military Region Three also contributed another battalion to Phasouk for a push to take back PS-26. ¹⁵

¹⁵ End Segment Sources for April:

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 257, 261, 263, 268, 274-275.

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Jesse Scott, 3-4.

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FRUS, Editorial Note; Soutchay Vongsavanh, *Indochina Monographs, RGL Military Operations and Activities in the Laotian Panhandle*, (U.S. Army Center of Military History, Washington, D.C., 1981) 53-56; 04/04/70 Central Intelligence Bulletin, Laos; CIA Bulletin, 04/30/70.
Lucius Clay, *CHECO*, 3,4.

"The war seems to be quieting down somewhat. I guess the enemy is resupplying as they dislike overextending themselves. They are still dug in well to the west of Sam Tong and nobody seems anxious to dig them out.

We still come home every night and although we would like to see this last, I doubt that it will. We in FEPA have made up our minds that we will have a reasonable margin of safety before we RON [at Long Tieng] again...

In the south, Saravane is being evacuated, I think mainly due to increased enemy pressure, as it is near their supply lines. I haven't been down there in some time, but from the paper the situation seems to be deteriorating. The NVA have rocketed Pakse several times, something that had never been done until this year. I feel they are doing all this to try and suck Nixon into Laos and create a further political upheaval. We'll see what happens after Cambodia is cleaned out. I personally think we should stop messing with all the politics and use what weapons are at our disposal to finish this non-war."

05/12/70 Letter Home.

During May, we commenced a series of diverse Special Missions in Military Region Two intent in preserving besieged areas around Long Tieng and at Bouam Long. With Thai battalions increasingly relieving Meo troops of defense tasks in the Long Tieng-Sam Tong complex, we delivered intelligence gathering and action teams into and out of denied areas in upper Military Region Two. The information was calculated to provide General Vang Pao and his advisors with timely intelligence of enemy intentions and attempt to take the

war directly to the Vietnamese. However, not all team missions were successful.

Because of the lack of nighttime security, Long Tieng commutes were still in vogue. On the first, Nikki Fillipi, Flight Mechanic Casio, and I ferried Papa Foxtrot Gulf upcountry. Close on our heels were Phil Payton, Mike Jarina, and Flight Mechanic Dimandal in 12F. Other Bell and H-34 crews followed at appropriate intervals.

Bouam Long was still being shelled and probed. Therefore, avoiding the western portion of the complex, we made approaches and departures by either circling directly overhead or from the north and east, while shuttling a few members of a Pakse battalion scrounged from defensive positions around Long Tieng into the Site-32 bowl and some of the thousands of refugees out to Phou Cum. Then work began in the Phou Sam Soun (LS-231) area in the hills northeast of Ban Ban, where a residue of a small resistance movement was being conducted against enemy forays. I logged four Special Missions that day.

The crew of 12F only worked half a day. After experiencing an N1 engine gas producer over temperature, they returned to Udorn.

Nonstop attacks and probes in the Long Tieng area continued by both sides throughout May. While RLG forces consolidated positions on parts of Phu Long Mat, the enemy was still active on unclaimed sites in the hills north of Long Tieng. This was apparent when six 122mm rockets impacted the complex. Other than being a strictly terror tactic, there were no casualties or major damage--only consternation.

Black Lion's position in the hills north of Sam Tong was the brunt of many enemy attacks on 5 May. The site faced troops-

in-contact (TIC) all day, but Raven-supported air strikes were helpful in maintaining the status quo. ¹

Mike, JJ McCauley, and Bobby Barrow flew north on Saturday in 96W. Performing six Special Missions, they worked Phu Cum, Bouam Long, and the Phou Sam Soun area.

Phil Goddard and Flight Mechanic Daniels joined me on Sunday. I was scheduled for a combination proficiency-route check in the newly installed dash 13 engine Papa Foxtrot Juliet Bell. These check rides were academic, for I had flown with both Phil and Wayne many times over the years and they knew exactly what to expect from me. As usual, Phil and I briefly discussed FEPA. Always seemingly sympathetic, Phil worked hard to appear one of the boys while still adhering to management policy, but it was impossible for someone in his position to straddle the line and have it both ways.

The flight was a legal means for Phil, who loved to fly, to temporarily vacate mundane office work for upcountry excitement. We left for The Alternate after completing required normal and emergency procedures.

Staging out of Site-50, we conducted five Special Missions at Bouam Long before returning to Udorn. I certainly appreciated the additional power to enhance mountain operations.

Even though we flew a full day north of the Plain of Jars, most strike missions were cancelled in Barrel Roll. A Raven FAC reported that FAG Poppy had abandoned his position and his location was presently unknown. ²

Captain Ellis Emery and Phil Ortillo joined me in 13F on the fourth. Returning to LS-50, in three Special Mission shuttles we began moving troops to the Route-61 area to observe,

¹ Extracts from ABCCC Reports.

² Extracts from ABCCC-Cricket-Reports.

gather information, and harass enemy traffic. One Special Mission at LS-32, which was increasingly enduring enemy siege tactics from the east, capped the day. As artillery counter battery fire from the bowl was continuous, caution was required by aircraft entering the area. Therefore, while still en route it was wise to establish radio contact with Customer Watts to cease artillery fire, and then, after making sure the guns were shut down, overhead the strip or the eastern ridgeline and descend when all was relatively quiet.

Accompanying Goddard and Daniels in Papa Foxtrot Juliet marked Jarina's chance to enjoy the increased power provided by the dash 13 engine. Also participating in Special Missions and thirty-two landings, they flew between Sites 50 and 33 (San Pha Kha). Shuttles commenced from Site-231 to San Pha Kha, a site often used during refugee movement.

Unused to severe battle conditions in the mountains, troops from southern Laos were unhappy being away from home, and likely unnerved by the enemy reputedly tightening the noose around the Site-32 perimeter. In the field for a month in a defensive mode around Long Tieng, upset about being relocated to Site-32 and the associated problems there, a quarter of the undisciplined Pakse troops soon rebelled at Bouam Long, stimulating return of the entire battalion to Military Region Four. There might have been good cause for their unrest, for the next night Alleycat reported that the anticipated attack around Showboat's position did not materialize while Cricket was on station. However, one Raven FAC did receive groundfire.

On 6 May, changing weather conditions in Barrel Roll created problems supporting troop concentrations reported by Peacock and Showboat. Of those fast movers able to expend

ordinance, the close proximity of enemy troops to Showboat's position restricted the fast movers to only strafing passes. ³

On Tuesday, while the Pakse battalion's dissent at Bouam Long was being addressed, flying 12F, Casio and I worked in and around the Long Tieng-Sam Tong defensive perimeter, positions Vang Pao was steadily expanding north toward Site-15. During the day I was called for a hurry-up single pilot mission at TG83227, located north of Site-20 and west of Site-72. Retaking areas such as this was costly, but denied the enemy sites to mount rocket launchers to impact Vang Pao's camps.

Jarina and Andy Anderson were very busy in 96W conducting fifty-seven landings, first on positions around the Sam Tong defense perimeter, and then shuttles from Padong (LS-5) to Khang Kho (LS-204), the eastern anchor of the Vang Pao Line.

The Khang Kho ridge and its environs represented considerable historical and military value in Military Region Two. Along with Padong, and known for its tough warriors, it was the original recruiting and resupply spot during the early 1961 movement to equip and train Meo to challenge the communist seizure of Xieng Khouang Ville and the Palin of Jars, and to prevent further movement south. Recently, in the Vietnamese surge to destroy Long Tieng, believing Site-204 too heavily fortified and costly to expend men and materiel, the enemy committed an error by bypassing it, as Khang Kho represented a central rally point for friendly troops in the area. Located close to the southern Plain, it was also Vang Pao's traditional launch site for operations toward that area, movement northeast toward Phu Khe and Site-03. General Vang Pao was known for his

³ Excerpts from ABCCC Reports.

diversions, but a manpower buildup at Khang Kho certainly heralded a future offensive.

JARINA

The seventh marked an exciting day for Captains Mike Jarina, Ellis Emery, and Flight Mechanic Terry Dunn crewing 96W.

Our gaggle of Bells and H-34 departed very early for Military Region Two. For the first time, I was piloting Papa Foxtrot Juliet's retrofitted dash 13 engine solo with Velasquez. We began working locally at Alternate. After also initially conducting local shuttles, Mike was reassigned to Site-50 and northern areas. New Customer Dick Mann, code named Bamboo, boarded 96W for his initial familiarization flight north of the Plain of Jars to Phu Cum. The tall man should have remained home.

Alleycat, the nighttime airborne control ship, received information that Rainbow's position at San Pha Kha (LS-33), north of Phou Cum, was undergoing heavy TIC. Radio contact was then lost. Later information revealed that, following three hours of severe TIC, FAG Rainbow had ceased nighttime radio contact, abandoned Site-33, and began moving south toward Slingshot's position at Site-50.

During the day, Site-32 Customer, call sign Watts, and the Cricket control crew received reports from Air America pilots flying in the vicinity of LS-33 that this and other surrounding friendly sites were assumed lost during the night. An undetermined number of friendly people were missing or believed captured by the enemy.

At 1700 hours, Raven pilots reported Vietnamese wearing green uniforms were walking around the San Pha Kha area. One strike flight was directed on the site with unknown killed by air (KBA).

Under attack by sporadic enemy artillery fire, Watts also reported intermittent contact with the enemy throughout the day at Bouam Long. This usually generated wounded requiring extraction by helicopter pilots. ⁴

SAR

From 1970 on, spurred on by Ambassador Godley's efforts, USAF Rules of Engagement (ROE) were gradually modified in the Barrel Roll east buffer zone along the North Vietnamese border north and south of Barthelemy Pass, where a majority of enemy Lines of Communication (LOC) were located.

Earlier in the year, when Long Tieng was in danger of falling, the original buffer zone was reduced in Houa Phan Province (Sam Neua), east of Route-65, permitting strikes to within four miles of the border. Armed reconnaissance was also allowed 200 meters either side of Route-7, past Nong Het to a point 2,600 meters west of Barthelemy Pass. Targets were still vetted and strikes conducted under FAC control.

Calculated to destroy Vietnamese infrastructure and supplies along eastern Route-7, targeted areas were still being interdicted by USAF bombers. Between 0950 and 1000 hours, an F4E, Tiger-01 was hit by 12.7mm fire while conducting a strafing run eight miles west-northwest of Ban Ban. The pilot managed to nurse his plane fourteen miles west to a point (UG1671) three miles north of the Route 71/74 junction before the two-man crew was obliged to punch out. Located between the enemy strong points at Nong Pet and Mounng Kheung (L-109), it was imperative the F-4 crew be retrieved ASAP.

⁴ Extracts from ABCCC Reports.

While still en route to Bouam Long, the crew of 96W heard a Mayday call on the common Guard frequency. Since Mike was double crewed and relatively close to the downed area, as per a tacit agreement with the Air Force, when minutes and seconds were of prime importance, and Jolly Green helicopters were not immediately available, he and Larry Hennesy, who was flying UH-34D Hotel-76, were called by the King controller and asked to attempt a SAR mission on the north edge of the Plain of Jars. Raven-22 FAC coordinated as the low SAR command ship. Contrary to all Customer SOPs, Mann remained onboard Jarina's aircraft.

Spotting smoke from the downed plane and with the help of the on-scene SAR commander, Raven-22, Hennesy identified and recovered the PIC almost immediately, but not the backseat pilot.

After a period of searching, the crew of 96W discovered backseat navigator, Love, just inside a tree line. Mike observed numerous tree stumps on the perimeter of the tree line that would prevent landing and necessitated a hoist pickup from a low hover. To prepare for this operation, Terry Dunn, who was sitting on a flak jacket, had to shift to the right rear bucket seat to activate the hoist mechanism, so he switched seats with Mann.

When Mike circled to conduct a pass over the smoke, he overflowed the tree line, and encountered considerable ground fire. Slowing the bullet's velocity somewhat, one round penetrated the left-hand cabin floor panel and the logbook before entering Bamboo's thigh and elbow. Terry informed the cockpit crew over ICS saying, "*The Customer has been hit.*" Mike inquired about his condition and asked if he could hold out a little longer, because they were in a position to retrieve the second pilot. The Flight Mechanic indicated that Mann looked ashen white.

Mike hovered over the tree line, but was unable to spot the pilot a second time. Dunn relayed there was additional ground fire and the pilot was reluctant to leave his concealed position. After Terry maneuvered Mike over the man, he adjusted the overhead hoist and lowered the cable and jungle penetrator through the trees. As this was his ticket out of a dicey situation, Love cooperated by approaching and sitting on the device. Terry began reeling him up, but the man radioed to wait, for he was not properly secured.

With the man "safely" in the cabin, Mike looked around for the best egress. Down slope was an option, but it was downwind amid stumps and trash left over from slash and burn methods. The other questionable option was to takeoff straight ahead over the tree line where he had previously encountered ground fire. Deciding it was too dangerous to takeoff downhill, Mike elected to exercise the second option. While climbing for altitude, the inevitable occurred. 96W was hosed again by small arms and 12.7mm fire. The twenty seconds of mayhem seemed like a lifetime. As Mike vacated the area, A-1 pilots unloaded ordnance on the tree line.

Captain Herb Baker, who was in the area flying an H-34, escorted Mike back to Lima Site-50. They dropped the uninjured crew and Dick Mann off at Phu Cum, where a Jolly Green crew, traditionally late to the party, but always chomping at the bit to garner recognition reserved for their minor participation, eventually picked the pilots and Mann up for the trip south.

Mike shut 96W down to inspect the battle damage. The crew had been extremely lucky during the fusillade of fire; there were nine holes in the left skid, fuselage, floor honeycomb, tail boom, baggage compartment, and other areas, but no vital components were hit. While Hennesy was examining the damage, he

humorously quipped, *"Do you think we can now return to the job that we are being paid for?"*

When the two A1-E ships assigned for escort arrived, they flew the Special Mission, returned to Alternate, and completed a twenty-nine-landing fun-filled day. The six crewmembers closely involved in the SAR shared a case of whiskey provided by the elated F-4 crew.

In case additional assets were required, I was dispatched north to assist in the SAR. I got there in time, but not being directly involved in the rescue, I was not credited with participating.

Five days later, 96W was repaired and out of the barn on the ramp for an FCF.

On Saturday, after 12F was towed out of the hangar and CPH Knight conducted one of his numerous Bells FCFs, Mike returned to The Alternate with Daniels in 12F. ⁵ They supplied and rotated troops to and from forward defense lines around Site-72. To prevent another accident like what happened to Bill Fraser and Pat McCarthy in the Site-85 area, class "A" weaponry was forbidden on our helicopters. This meant no more unsecured hand grenades hanging from belts.

Without Customer presence and guidance, there was always the ten percent who never got the word. During the course of the shuttles a trooper wanted to board with a pineapple type grenade. Daniels told him to remove and leave the item. Frustrated, the individual removed the grenade and tossed it up through the rotor blades. Like a clay pigeon used for sheet shooting it hit a blade and powdered. Not happy, Mike shut down to inspect the damage. There was a perfect imprint of the device

⁵ Wheels could be installed on the Bell skids in order for the machine to be moved.

just below the leading edge of a blade. The spar was not damaged. Despite the damage they completed the short day.

Pressure on Bouam Long continued unabated. On the 10th FAG Showboat reported a short TIC event in the morning. The site was supported throughout the day with many strike sorties. Ravens were fragged for forty-two sorties and worked forty. All recce missions were successful. ⁶

THE BOLOVENS

While the Attoupeu area was being efficiently rolled up by enemy forces, a rocket attack was launched at General Phasouk's Pakse headquarters and the airport. The attack was not the first, but it appeared that the enemy was becoming even bolder and more aggressive in Military Region Four.

With enemy on the move, the general speculated the communists were moving to:

"Secure the Se Kong River, Route-16, and sanctuaries in support of future enemy operations against Cambodia and South Vietnam."

This was believed to be feasible by those in charge of intelligence assessments, but was considered a risk to the enemy, for these routes were more easily subject to interdiction than Routes-96 and 110.

The April attack on Site-10 stimulated the regional commander to request the General Staff and Souvanna Phouma to order the return of the battalion Phasouk had sent to Vang Pao during the battle for Long Tieng and Bouam Long. This was

⁶ Mike Jarina Interviews.
Bill Leary May 7 1970 Telephone Interviews with Mike Jarina and Ellis Emery.
FIC Activity Report.
Extracts from ABCCC Reports.



The Pakse airfield looking northwest across the Mekong River at Runway 32. To the right the Se Don divides the town into two portions. Riverboats ply trade with Thailand.

Wayne Knight Collection.



Pakse airfield. Foreground displays mixed helicopter and fixed wing aircraft. Far upper right is the location of Lao T-28 assets.
Wayne Knight Collection.

accomplished, along with the addition of a battalion from Military Region Three.

With no one remaining to oppose them, Attopeu was left to enemy designs. Since the strength of enemy forces on the low ground was largely unknown, the general ordered his T-28 pilot contingent at Pakse to bomb FAR military supplies within the Attopeu perimeter. On the Bolovens, he also ordered a counter attack focused on recapturing the FSB at PS-26. To reinforce the small unit at PS-38 and accomplish the offense, the recently arrived battalions were flown to the 4,000-foot strip. With units firmly in place, the mixed battalions, consisting of several hundred troops, advanced six miles northeast to PS-26. Early on 1 May, the force reputedly encountered stiff resistance from an undetermined number of enemy. They withdrew to allow friendly air to neutralize the position. During the fracas, predictably during Lao warfare, the FAN element departed the field when under fire.

After regrouping on the sixth, half the troops remaining in the field moved back to PS-26 where they managed to establish a temporary foothold, only to be ejected within a few hours.

The battle raged on over the next two days, with contestants swapping ownership of the site four times. At the same time T-28 pilots, conducting close air support in the area, reported an estimated three Vietnamese companies maneuvering near the southern edge of the Bolovens.

Bloodied and beaten, the PS-38 unit withdrew.

With no obstacles remaining to oppose them, enemy units surged along the southwest rim to engage PS-23 and PS-42. By Monday, these sites were no longer viable government positions. The situation worsened when PS-38 fell, leaving the entire lower southeastern Plateau to the communists, and denying the Agency one more site from which to conduct road watch activity.

By mid-May an SGU battalion was sent to PS-22 from the Agency-run camp at Ban Khok Mai (LS-171) north of Saravane, where they prepared to move south for another assault on PS-26. Enemy defenses proved too strong to overcome at the site, so the battalion moved on and directed attention to PS-38. Aided by T-28 strikes that averaged thirty-eight sorties a day in May, and with artillery support, the unit moved into PS-38 at 1730 hours on 21 May and immediately began receiving heavy machine gun and B-40 rocket fire from two bunkers at the edge of the site. Raven-42 worked strike aircraft in support.

With the site secure by 23 May, the unit refitted and prepared for another offensive against PS-26. Retention of sites lining the Plateau's southern and eastern rim was important to deny enemy the use of logistic routes on and along the Se Kong waterway. ⁷

LTC MR-2

Mike Jarina and "the thumb," Ben Shaffer, crewed Papa Foxtrot Juliet to Sam Tong on the twelfth. They supported local positions during a thirty-seven-landing day.

With Mike deadheading, Robbie Robertson, and Shaffer returned to Site-20 the next day flying the same aircraft. After working the Site-72 area, they were assigned a trip to Phou Cum and Bouam Long when the Customer considered it reasonably quiet during Raven-controlled air strikes in support of troops in contact (TIC).

Raven FACs worked twenty-eight sorties on Wednesday. Raven-26 reported two air bursts of white phosphorous type warheads over a position north of FAG Wildcat. Bursts were observed at 8,300 feet MSL, and the rocket contrail emerged from the east.

⁷Extracts from ABCCC Reports.

North of Sam Tong, Black Lion reported to Raven-28 that patrols from two outposts observed two enemy platoons carrying 122mm rockets. However, by the time this was reported to a Raven pilot and Cricket, the enemy had vacated the area.

FAG Lulu reported a 12.7mm gun position at UF1395 in the valley between Moung Oum (LS-22) and Moung Cha (LS-113). FAG Kneecap reported his position in the same area. ⁸

From the northern most reaches of the PDJ, enemy supplies moved north as far as possible over trails from the Route-71 LOC. Then porters, or grunts, laboriously humped goods and bullets to the Moung Seng valley five miles south southwest of Site-32. Declared a staging area for the siege of Bouam Long, and with enemy concentrations identified in this area, a free-fire zone was created for targeting and dumping weapon loads during adverse weather.

Following assignments north, on the way back to The Alternate, the crew of PFJ stopped at TG5669, north of Houei Nong (LS-220), west of Phou Fa Noi, and north of the portion of Route-7 leading to the Phou Soung 7/13 junction. At Long Tieng they were assigned local missions until returning to Tango-08.

Thursday, with Casio replacing Shaffer as Flight Mechanic, restricted by adverse weather, the crew performed thirteen landings in the Site-50 and Site-72 areas.

With the enemy taking advantage of bad weather that curtailed most air support, troop concentrations were reported throughout the region by FAGs Black Lion, Slingshot, Poppy, Jackrabbit, and Showboat. Slow movers were able to work targets at Bouam Long. Substituting for air, Hilltop's position at Ban Na received artillery support from a fire support base (FSB). ⁹

⁸ Extracts from ABCCC Reports.

⁹ Extracts from ABCCC Reports.

After six days at home, on the fourteenth, I returned to the field with Jay Meyers in XW-PFH to participate in the fortification and supply of landing zones and clearing actions around the forward Long Tieng defensive perimeter.

Mike and Tod Yourglich returned on Friday in Papa Foxtrot Gulf. Working locally, they conducted fifty-eight landings in the Sam Tong-Site-72 and Phu Long Mat areas.

Taking advantage of training assignments and Company mandated route checks, Wayne Knight and crew, flying PFG, also joined the gaggle of helicopters working the Site-20A area.

The following morning Mike deadheaded to Long Tieng in Golf with Dick Elder and Tod. They were assigned to retrieve troops from training sites at Mounng Cha (LS-113) and Pha Khao (LS-14). They also worked sites in the 72, 50 and 32 areas.

At 1620 hours, Ruby-52 reported that Black Lion was seriously wounded, but the site was still in friendly hands.

TIC was reported at LS-32 and to the northwest at Slingshot's position at Phou Vieng (LS-06).

A Raven pilot observed a 37mm gun north of Long Tieng, but Cricket was unable to exploit the target due to the lack of fast movers and bad weather.

Weather continued an issue the next day and all scheduled Raven-directed missions were cancelled. TIC was again reported at Phou Vieng, but Cricket was unable to provide support.

On the 27th, because of a lack of Raven FACs, some strike flights worked directly with Showboat, and late the next day Raven-29 worked a flight at Bouam Long.

By the 29th weather prevented use of fast movers at Showboat. However, there were no reports of TIC. ¹⁰

¹⁰Extracts from ABCCC Reports.

Ground attacks continued through the month at Site-32, but firing from supporting enemy guns located west of Bouam Long measurably tapered off and then completely ceased at the Site-32 fortress. Perhaps a combination of friendly air, counter battery fire, additional well-trained FAR reinforcements, the depletion of artillery rounds, and inability to supply the gun crews contributed to this welcome respite. Since no one was entirely certain that the enemy had abandoned the fight, trained FAR troops continued being delivered to the site. With these forces in place, a concerted push began to clear the area of Vietnamese.

Within a month, Phou Then, the major outpost lost in April, was reoccupied and the siege of Bouam Long deemed largely over--for the present.

Despite ejecting the barbarians from the castle gates of Site-32, there was consternation in the Western camp. 1970 marked the first time that enemy battalions had moved and remained so far west in that particular area at the beginning of the monsoon season. Moreover, the capture of Houei Sang (LS-206), Phou Sam Sang, and the assaults on Bouam Long gave rise to speculation that there would be concerted efforts to eventually capture Phou Cum and Site-32. Accomplishing this goal would almost completely seal off upper Military Region Two and the northern rim of the PDJ. This, plus the enemy positions held on the southern Plain of Jars, did not bode well for the 1970/1971 dry season.

By mid-May, joint military prognostications, to include those of Vientiane attaches, evidenced pessimism for much success in Military Region Two during Vang Pao's coming monsoon offensive, citing as proof that, beset with a combination of

shelling and tactical air, the tenacious enemy was only withdrawing slowly.

The conflict was not over along the Vang Pao Line north of Long Tieng and Sam Tong. Adverse weather again impacted air and ground operations north of Sam Tong. On the 17th, with Allied air unable to respond, in what appeared an enemy last gasp to reacquire territory before the onset of the full rainy season, five outposts were lost. Efforts by troops from Ta Tham Bleung to recapture the positions nearly succeeded, but excessive casualties caused the battalion to withdraw. There was no clear assessment of enemy losses.

Monday morning Terry Dunn and I crewed Papa Foxtrot Juliet to Site-20A. Working locally, we removed dead and wounded from the battlefield for triage and later disposition. Then we supported efforts to retake portions of the lost outposts.

Flying Papa Foxtrot Gulf, Charlie Weitz, Mike Jarina, and Velasquez also joined the fun. After supporting Phu Cum and Bouam Long, the crew returned to Sam Tong to participate in one Special Mission into a landing zone to remove wounded. While returning to Udorn, they dropped the casualties at the Ban Son hospital.

AN EXCEPTIONALLY TAXING DAY

"I had another interesting one the other day [19 May]. A couple of pilots were down and we were given a set of coordinates on the map. I knew the area well as we had worked there during the PDJ operation.

The weather was bad, as we are having an early rainy season and we had to work our way around to the area. I was getting groundfire when I tried to let down to proceed into the area. Next the flack started coming up. It was really heavy, but we

managed to get out ok. I started asking about the coordinates and discovered that we had been given the wrong ones.

After finding out the correct ones we made the pickup. I had some trouble with my hoist and radios and was unable to pull the man into the ship, but an H-34 [pilot] was able to do the job. The pilots were the happiest guys I have known. They had a party for us that night, but I was too tired to go, as in the two hours it took to do the job, I had completely exhausted myself. It was worth it, as we saved two pilots.

We had five saves this month.

I am sending some letters under separate cover to place with the others to keep for posterity."

29 May 1970 Letter Home.

Unlike the undeclared, but indisputably hot war in South Vietnam, under the Geneva Accords of 1965 Laos was designated a strictly neutral country where foreign military units were forbidden to work. This political facade never altered, but neither protagonist honored this protocol-with the communists violating it to a much greater extent. Therefore, in 1964, when Laos was in imminent danger of falling to the communists, and intelligence was sorely lacking, U.S. overflights and armed reconnaissance missions were authorized by USG. At the time the Lyndon Johnson Administration "wise men" elected to pursue a pragmatic and largely disjointed approach to conduct the Second Indochina War as it applied to North Vietnam and Laos. It was akin to "too many cooks in the kitchen." Moreover, at the sacrifice of many good airmen, military search and rescue

vehicles were either forbidden to enter the country or were inadequate for the work. They seemed an afterthought. ¹¹

The USAF gradually assumed a greater responsibility for SAR work in the late summer of 1965. Trained crews employed CH-3, and then the more powerful HH-53 helicopters. However, even with superior equipment especially manufactured for the demanding job, Air America never relinquished the 1964 U.S State Department mandate for their pilots to conduct SAR missions in Laos. As any participant of a SAR can attest, none were exactly the same. There were too many variables: weather, terrain, and enemy situation were but a few involved. ¹²

Since the RLG lost or abandoned northern territory at Na Khang (LS-36), Phu Pha Thi (LS-85), and other locations where USAF assets formerly staged for rescues in North Vietnam, Air America helicopter crews were again challenged to perform yeoman SAR work, an extra hazardous mission that, except for a "Catch-22" provision, was never foreseen in the original Maddriver contract. Nowhere was this more prevalent than in Military Region Two, where Air America helicopters were concentrated, and worked in close proximity to major strike activity and consequently downed military pilots.

In contrast, USAF helicopter assistance was often far removed from the battlefield at Udorn and Nakhon Phanom bases, where, to satisfy military SOPs, crews required lengthy briefings regarding many categories before launching north. However, USAF tardy participation in the Lao Theater did not relieve Air America of SAR duty in other portions of Laos.

¹¹ This aspect of SAR work in Laos is more adequately described in Books Four and Five.

¹² USAF HH-43s were first introduced, but despite courageous efforts by the crews, proved inadequate to accomplish the mission.

With the level of large AAA weapon activity in and around Bouam Long diminished and considered basically over, attempts by the defenders to retake outlying posts and clear the immediate area commenced in earnest. Against this end, I was sent north in Bell 205 XW-PFH with Captain Frenchy Smith and Flight Mechanic Ortillo to work at Sites-32 and 50. Since my monthly time had already reached sixty-three hours, Frenchy was allowed to log ferry flight time, while I logged time for deadhead pay.

Customer Jerry Daniels had planned and arranged one Special Mission for the day. During the siege on Site-32 these missions were generally staged out of Phu Cum, where crews would wait impatiently for A-1E cover and a propitious time to launch. When fixed wing aircraft were unable to air drop munitions and supplies to beleaguered sites, our missions usually involved resupply, troop movements, and extraction of wounded. Also involved in the area that day were two H-34 crews composed of Captains Tim "Woo" Woosley, Al Cates, their First Officers Manus Disoum and Kiattiyos Vongprasert, and Flight Mechanics Stan "Stash" Waite and M. Leveriza. After completing the mission, we all continued to work in less invasive areas at Bouam Long and Phu Cum.

Since our helicopters were all equipped with operational ultra-high frequency (UHF) radios, we always had our selector switches set on a preferred frequency (usually Company monitored 228.5) that also included a preset guard frequency (243.0, 259.0 backup). This was standard practice enabling us to monitor Mayday calls from any stricken aircraft. In addition, we had access to tactical and other SAR frequencies for King, the HC-130P SAR controlling aircraft.

Later in the day, with weather conditions worsening, a youthful voice issued a blanket radio call from the high-flying King requesting that any Air America helicopter pilot contact

the SAR ship. Since we were still part of the rescue equation, and Jolly Green crews were likely hours and miles away at Udorn or Nakhon Phanom, minutes even seconds counted when airmen were on the ground. Therefore, with a narrow window of opportunity before the enemy had time to react, it was incumbent that we immediately respond. During such situations, all normal work in the concerned area ceased and Air America pilots hearing the call for help proceeded to the area.

After contacting the King controller and obtaining the downed ship's coordinates, but no other intelligence, I landed at Phu Cum, where I could identify and plot the location on my chart. SARs and unknowns always cropped up when one least expected, so against the possibility of delays and unforeseen events, I instructed Ortillo to hurriedly pump two barrels of A-4 jet fuel (kerosene) into the tanks.

After marking the UMT coordinates on my old, shopworn map, I was shocked to discover that the Air Force people had recorded the downed plane at Nong Pet, the Route-7/71 junction at the mouth of the narrow valley leading to Ban Ban. I knew this area well. During the previous year's Plain of Jars operation, this was the location that everyone generically called the 7/71 split. Even throughout the period when we "owned" the Plain of Jars, the often-contested cross-road was never a particularly safe area to work. Now firmly under enemy control, Nong Pet was considered a very high AAA weapon threat by the Customer and our Flight Information Center (FIC) people. Certainly, the location had to be a mistake. No sane knowing person would attempt to send unarmed helicopter crews into such a hornet's nest.

Moreover, I recalled my "forty-mile thumb rule," gleaned from years of experience, which concluded that the high-flying navigators in the control ships often reported positions forty miles from an actual location. I attributed these errors mainly

to the navigator's inexperience, fostered by military yearly tours which plagued American participation in the entire Southeast Asian war. The North Vietnamese Army had no similar problem. Their people were involved for the duration or death, whichever occurred first.

Assuming a plotting error, I explained the current high threat at Nong Pet to the King listeners, requesting the King crew reexamine their coordinates and check their source for validity and reliability. When they confirmed the same location, I requested yet another assessment. The controller was patient with me, insisting that the issued coordinates were correct. I was not happy.

By that time, Ortillo had completed refueling the ship and it was time to depart for the projected coordinates. While we were shut down, Woosley and Cates had gone on ahead, as had Porter Captain KD Nolan with Customer Jerry "Hog" Daniels onboard. Faster than a helicopter, presenting a smaller target than an H-34, KD was planning to assess the area situation, search, report the weather, and conduct communications with U.S. military aircraft. Since we were entering an unknown situation with no briefing, relieved of having to obtain these variables would tend to help us focus only on the task at hand and facilitate our mission. ¹³

In addition to low clouds in the south, and since there was still enemy activity west of Bouam Long, instead of conducting a

¹³ KD Nolan: A short landing and takeoff (STOL) pilot working alongside us in the trenches, I had known KD for years and earnestly liked the man. We often talked, joked, and swapped war stories at The Alternate. KD was also involved in a later phase of the T-28 Alpha program. On one mission, after experiencing a problem during a SAR mission he attempted a landing at Na Khang, flipped over, but miraculously survived. The next time I saw him, I admonished him to use more caution-certainly an oxymoron in our line of work.

direct flight to Nong Pet that would involve crossing or paralleling the east-west stretch of Route-71, we elected to circumnavigate southeast, skirt Bouam Long to the east, and then turn south toward Phou Nok Kok, a familiar checkpoint at the western portion of the Ban Ban Valley. This position was about twenty-five miles from Phu Cum, but as we were considerably faster than the lumbering H-34s, I calculated that we would arrive about the same time as the other helicopters. Then the process would necessitate negotiating an eight-mile-long gauntlet of hills southwest along a narrow valley toward Nong Pet. This might be accomplished safely, and avoid the danger of a Route-7 overflight by employing terrain following, and hugging the northern high bank of mountains lining the defile. By the time we arrived at the junction, although there had been no mention of USAF or T-28 escort, perhaps there would be air assets available to assist us in the recovery attempt and also validate our SAR SOP. If not, any problems could be sorted out later.

After arriving at altitude in the weather-impacted area, I observed the H-34s and the Porter circling in the general vicinity of the eastern tip of the former Black Lion position. The congestion did not seem wise to me, so, to preclude a midair collision, I remained on the northern portion of the valley where I believed my ship was masked from the road.

Because of a necessity to launch and expedite the mission, we had not briefed each other regarding our plans, but independently accepted the SAR task. This was the norm for Air America pilots, and as most of us had participated in previous SARs, we generally were cognizant of the rules and what was required.

Since the USAF had taken over the majority of SAR work in recent years, the requirement for us to participate was

relatively rare, and largely depended on our proximity to the scene. We did not always work close to each other and merely converged on a spot from all quarters when called. Generally, the senior man in a group was accorded mission commander status. Sometimes we briefed on guard or other FM, VHF, or UHF radio frequencies. Although not highly trained for SAR work, most of us were former military aviators and possessed some hoist operating experience. Mine was acquired in the ocean just off the beach at Cubi Point, on Luzon Island. I had also participated in an actual SAR on a Japanese freighter eighty miles north of Okinawa.

At some time in their Air America career, everyone had their chance in the proverbial barrel. I would wager there were few, if any, seasoned Air America helicopter pilots or crews who had not participated in some form of SAR operation, if not always conducting an actual rescue, perhaps as a backup, or on the periphery waiting to assist. Since we were in different programs, I had never flown with either Woosley or Cates, but as former Marine aviators and old timers, both were reputedly good pilots and already had SAR recoveries under their belt. (Al Cates most recently.) The only thing I did not know about the men was how each reacted under fire, a criterion I used to judge a man's worth in a tight spot. At any rate, I was happy to have the H-34 crews along, for I was certain that we would require all the assets and human expertise we could muster that day for the developing can of worms confronting us.

An extensive unbroken cloud layer of undetermined tops stretched east from Phu Nok Kok, limiting our orbiting altitude, but without precipitation to hamper visibility. In contrast, looking southwest from my venue there was no perceptible ceiling. The clouds were impenetrable, appearing to plunge nearly to the ground in the direction of the mountain-bracketed

slot leading toward Nong Pet. In addition, heavy rain showers created marginal visibility. Rather than descend and attempt to proceed toward the junction we elected to initially search our immediate area, but no smoke, beeper, or any sign of aviators was evident.

To assess enemy presence that I suspected to be lurking below me, and to better judge worsening weather conditions in the direction of Nong Pet, I commenced a slow circling descent close to the northern hills. To help avoid a precarious situation I could not handle, I employed a time-honored technique that I had developed to eliminate invariable radio chatter, rotor, and transmission noise that tended to mask groundfire in my sound attenuating helmet. Therefore, I keyed my ICS button to more clearly discern the Rice Crispy snap, crackle, and pop sound of small arms fire. I continued to slowly spiral down until the sounds of gunfire became too intense. Then I climbed back out of rifle range.

The current weather pattern was quickly shifting east and would shortly force us into the Ban Ban Valley, where I had previously been warned by the Alternate Customer that six 37mm guns were positioned in deep earthen pits to survive AF bombing strikes. Although difficult to hit, the sites presented a downside for enemy gunners, as the tight holes restricted their ability to elevate, and traverse the gun barrels.

The H-34 pilots were already in the valley. Woosley was orbiting further east than Cates. As I looked in their direction, multiple 37mm bursts blossomed under Tim's helicopter. It was only the second or third time I had observed the black puffs, first observed over Routes-6 and 61 while returning late in the day from eastern sites to overnight at Na Khang. From my angle, it appeared communist gunners were unable to traverse their weapons, but I was unsure if they could adjust

fused rounds to Tim's altitude. In order to avoid having to descend into that dreaded valley to effect another crew rescue, I advised Timmy Woo that he was being shot at and to vacate the area.

We had already been in the area much too long, allowing the enemy time to react. Due to deteriorating weather precluding a thorough search and increasing enemy fire, lacking any sign of downed aviators, it was obvious we were not accomplishing any useful function and might create other problems. Moreover, since the SAR had been relatively disorganized from the start, rather than further complicate the situation it was obvious that we should depart before one of us was forced down. Therefore, without anyone making the decision, we collectively reverted to the policy of "every man for himself."

Both Woosley and Cates heeded my warning and began climbing northbound. Cates ascended to 12,500 feet, the H-34s approximate service ceiling. At that thin atmosphere the aircraft ceased climbing, so he was obliged to mush through clouds under instrument (IFR) conditions. After the other aircraft cleared the valley, I elected to retrace the reciprocal of the inbound track and head north while skirting the LS-32 area to the east. As I reached the foothills leading to my intended path out of the valley, a volley of red tracer fire streaked by my right side. The large caliber fire from below likely emanated from the invisible Route-6, one of the feeder trails leading into the valley, or from a gun dragged from one of the numerous caves dotting the northern valley. No one else onboard observed the momentary fire, but that was academic, for we were instantly out of range. Relatively unconcerned, I had not heard any hits or felt concussions, but was unsure about the status of Hotel's main rotor blades. Therefore, in the event of crippling battle damage and uncertain if I might have to ground the aircraft, I

headed for Site-50, where security was relatively better than at Bouam Long.

A Raven forward air control (FAC) pilot had been monitoring our conversations. He called to advise that we had been searching in the wrong area, something I suspected from the onset of the SAR. He indicated the actual downed aviators were located at UTM map coordinates UG4242, three miles north of Route-72. This was eight miles east of Xieng Khouang Ville in the northern foothills of Hill 5669. The area appeared isolated with no reported activity reported over the downed pilots' survival radios. Unfortunately, the Raven O-1E pilot, merely relaying the message, was nearing bingo fuel state and would soon have to return to (RTB) Long Tieng before any of us could arrive in the area.

A quick check of my chart indicated the area in question was a sixteen nautical mile direct flight from Nong Pet over hostile terrain, but from Site-50--well you guessed it--almost forty miles. So much for King Control's people. The Casterlin thumb rule remained inviolate.

THE SHOOTDOWN

Not revealed to us until years later, an Udorn-based RF-4C from the 11th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron with a Bullwhip-01 call sign, had been hit, likely by an entrenched 37mm gun, in the vicinity of Ban Ban. The crew of PIC Major Cyril "Cy" CA Crawford and Captain "Fred" FP Norton headed south and bailed.

Sometime during the SAR process, Jolly Green crews launched from Udorn, but upon receiving the original coordinates, one ship suddenly developed a hydraulic problem at the border and, adhering to standard operating procedures (SOP) both aircraft turned around and RTB.

Based in Udorn since December 1969, Crawford and Norton were mid-way through their overseas tours. (Crawford had logged twenty-five missions.) The men were part of the Fast FAC Reconnaissance Program. Bullwhip aircrews often conducted recce missions twice a day over the most heavily travelled enemy supply routes and afterward debriefed with collocated Laredo FAC pilots. Slightly more than three hours generally elapsed from the time Bullwhip crews first recce a target to the time an F-4 FAC controlled strikes on the LOCs. Since an F-4 Phantom rapidly consumed fuel, refueling took place three times during a mission. Some days they photographed F-4s firing missiles into caves that contained trucks, guns, and other war supplies.

On this particular day, bad weather restricted operations in the Ban Ban Valley. Falcon-01, Fast FAC F-4 pilot, Alea Harwich, who controlled strikes, was also experiencing adverse weather conditions and asked Crawford if he could join on him. "Affirmative."

With slightly better weather conditions to the east, the Bullwhip 01 reconnaissance pilots were conducting a photo run in the Route-7 valley, generally between Ban Ban seven miles east, to the distinctive double looped "M" in the Nam Piou. Briefed as to the anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) danger, committed to flying underneath the existing overcast at over Mach One, they encountered a well-organized flak trap consisting of 23mm and 37mm guns. Numerous tracers crisscrossed the wall of steel thrown up into the air and the F-4 was hit.

Crawford immediately turned south and began a steep high-speed climb intending to vacate the area and fly as far south as possible toward home plate. As status of the two engines was unknown, the climbing maneuver was also calculated to slow the plane without having to reduce throttle levers, allowing the

pilots to analyze flashing warning lights, and to commence emergency procedures.

Most sophisticated aircraft, particularly U.S. combat jets, are equipped with redundant flight controls. The Phantom aircraft was designed and manufactured with a redundancy of three hydraulic systems for boost, and to ensure a pilot smooth movement of the control surfaces at high speeds. One system on the Bullwhip jet was lost during the initial groundfire. A second system powered the ailerons. However, with the right aileron missing and losing hydraulic fluid, it did not appear that the system would continue to be viable. The third and final system powered the elevator control. Failure, or a drastic malfunction, of these hydraulic boosts would cause the elevator to move full down, resulting in the airplane pitching straight up, and rendering it uncontrollable.

With pressure on the final system rapidly going south, within a short time all hydraulic function was lost. At about 16,000 feet, with the controls frozen, Crawford radioed his decision to eject. Falcon-01, who had been covering the mission, radioed a Mayday to King and remained with the crew until reaching a bingo state, when he was relieved by an A-1 pilot, Zorro-44.

The Martin Baker ejection device was designed to secure a pilot in his seat under a drogue chute until descending below 12,000 feet. Then, at a predetermined altitude, an altimeter was programmed to open the main parachute. Estimating that they had punched out at a higher altitude (perhaps as high as 30,000 feet), Norton recalled a lengthy ride to the ground. As time dissolved into a blur, it seemed like an eternity before his chute deployed, the seat separated, and a prolonged period of falling through the undercast ensued, while he anticipated clearing the cloud layer and what lay underneath.

The final seconds of the experience were equally exciting. At some point in the descent, Fred's parachute had a full gore panel torn out, causing him to steer in the opposite direction to the tear.

While exiting the overcast, he spied a road to his right; to the north lay a heavily forested hill with a trench system on top. Hoping to achieve cover and concealment after landing, he steered toward the tallest trees on the hill. Crashing through a high, dense canopy, his parachute caught on an obstruction just as his feet touched the ground. At first glance, it looked like he was in a secondary forest with relatively good ground visibility and virtually no weeds or bushes at ground level.

After activating quick disconnects on the parachute apparatus and assessing his options, deciding he required more cover, Norton moved uphill toward the trenches. Just before the tree line ended he stopped, electing not to proceed further because of potential minefields around the fortifications, or personnel on top of the hill.

Also penetrating tall trees, Major Cy Crawford became tangled in branches. Temporarily incapacitated by shock, it took some time before he employed the tree lowering device to reach the ground.

About this time Zorro-44, who replaced Falcon-01, arrived in the area.

Cy had heard stories about other pilot rescues in Laos. He did not know exactly what lay ahead, but was confident of deliverance.

THE RESCUE

Knowledge that the two aviators had landed in a less impacted area than Nong Pet was like a breath of fresh air to me. However, I still intended to land at Phu Cum and shut down

so Ortillo could conduct an airworthiness inspection. The H-34 drivers, slightly ahead of me, having encountered no similar issues, elected to fly at altitude across the Plain of Jars, first traveling south and then assuming a dogleg southeast to the target site. Flying across such hostile territory marked a dangerous procedure for a helicopter pilot during any phase of the Lao war.

While I carefully scanned my map, Ortillo discovered no battle damage to the main rotor blades or any major components. Normally, assuming sufficient fuel, during a situation like this, I would fly a "safe" path west of the Plain of Jars, then work my way east to a point near Phou Sao, and then north between Phu Kabo and Xieng Khouang Ville. But these were not ordinary times. If I was going to participate in phase two of the SAR, I would have to deviate slightly, generally following the identical flight path as Woosley and Cates, but at a lower altitude and increased speed in order to join on them. If all went smoothly, I calculated that unless unforeseen elements entered the equation, just enough fuel was available to complete the mission and return to Long Tieng.

As we proceeded south over the old Momentum site at Phou Vieng (LS-06) toward the outer fringes of the northern Plain, I harbored reservations about the ultimate conclusion of the mission. During previous SARs we rarely intentionally overflew areas of known AAA activity. However, because of constantly changing operational requirements, we had evolved considerably since the early days when caution ruled and circumnavigating known enemy concentrations was the norm. It appeared that the nature of SARs always elicited the worst in our people, stimulating us to abandon safety, common sense, and accept undue risks to accomplish a mission. With due respect to other pilots, the responsibility of rearing and nurturing my growing family

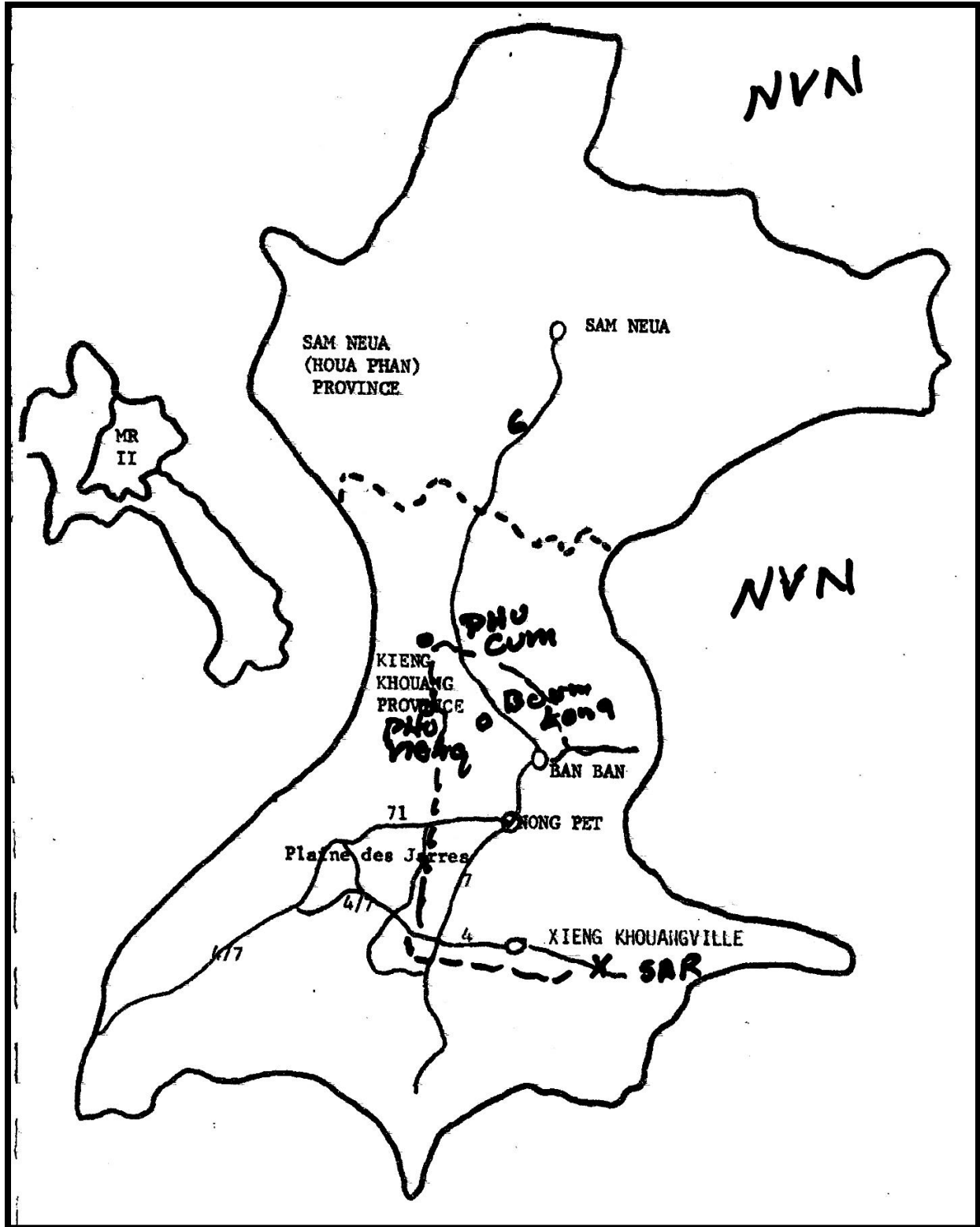
did tend to instill an added modicum of caution in my upcountry operations. Still, I could perform any job--but my way.

I called the H-34 pilots and learned that they were in the vicinity of Arrowhead Lake just west of Route-7, and about a mile northeast of what used to be the historical Phong Savan market town, so far without incident. This was amazing and equally relieving. Perhaps my crew would be equally fortunate. However, weather was excellent and with the slapping noise of the H-34s rotor blades at altitude, alerted enemy gunners might be seeking to claim yet another airborne victim that day. To further diminish the gap between us, I increased speed.

With an element of doubt creeping into my reasoning, and adrenalin coursing through my body, my anal sphincter muscles began twitching slightly. This condition was humorously called a "pucker factor" in the trade. Not uncommon under extreme stress, it could be elicited by the time to reflect on the what ifs, while en route to a target area.

Soon the torture was over. I caught up to and passed the H-34s near the western end of the Xieng Khouang Valley. Something of a first, I was elated at what we had accomplished thus far. Apparently, the element of surprise proved successful and all three of us would likely arrive in the target area about the same time.

Using the masking potential of the elevated Phou Gnouan Mountain range, I descended, skirting the Ville to the north. From the 1969-early 1970 PDJ operation, and after years of working in the Phu Khe vicinity of the Ville, I was quite familiar with and felt reasonably comfortable traversing the area. From the time Lima Lima (Lima-22) served as the area supply base in the center of the Plain of Jars, I had flown many missions, and supplied many of General Vang Pao's hilltop positions strung along the north side of the valley. I had



Area of the Bullwhip shoot down and SAR in Xieng Khouang Province. The dotted line indicates our egress from the Ban Ban valley past Lima Site-32 to Lima Site-50; then across Lima Site-06 and the PDJ to the pilots' location in the eastern Xieng Khouang Ville valley.

ranged further east around Phou Nampong overlooking parts of Route-72, and on occasion flown almost to the border. Moreover, even though there were no friendly people likely in the immediate area, and except for possibly hunters or wandering bands of Pathet Lao soldiers, there was no reason for there to be a problem in these scrubby foothills. Still, it was denied area and anything was possible.

While we were some distance from the pilots' location, with no aircraft wreckage or smoke to guide us, the aviators reported themselves in relatively good condition and talked us toward their position. To their knowledge, there was no overt enemy presence. Still, we had to be careful, for sometimes the enemy moved in, waited patiently, and set up a trap to shoot down rescue ships. Another thought occurred to me. Despite an enemy line of communication (LOC) being located just to the south, it was probably not well developed yet, not used in the daytime or at this time of year.

As I closed on the aviators, I felt good regarding our chances of completing the mission, but bearing in mind that fifty percent success was not the goal. A complete mission would only be achieved when we were all back at Long Tieng with our charges. ¹⁴

We had been delayed initially by King personnel's erroneous Nong Pet coordinates, but our response afterward was timely. We knew that time was an essential factor in any crew extraction and that it was imperative we complete the job and depart ASAP. From all outward appearances, the enemy had not yet moved into

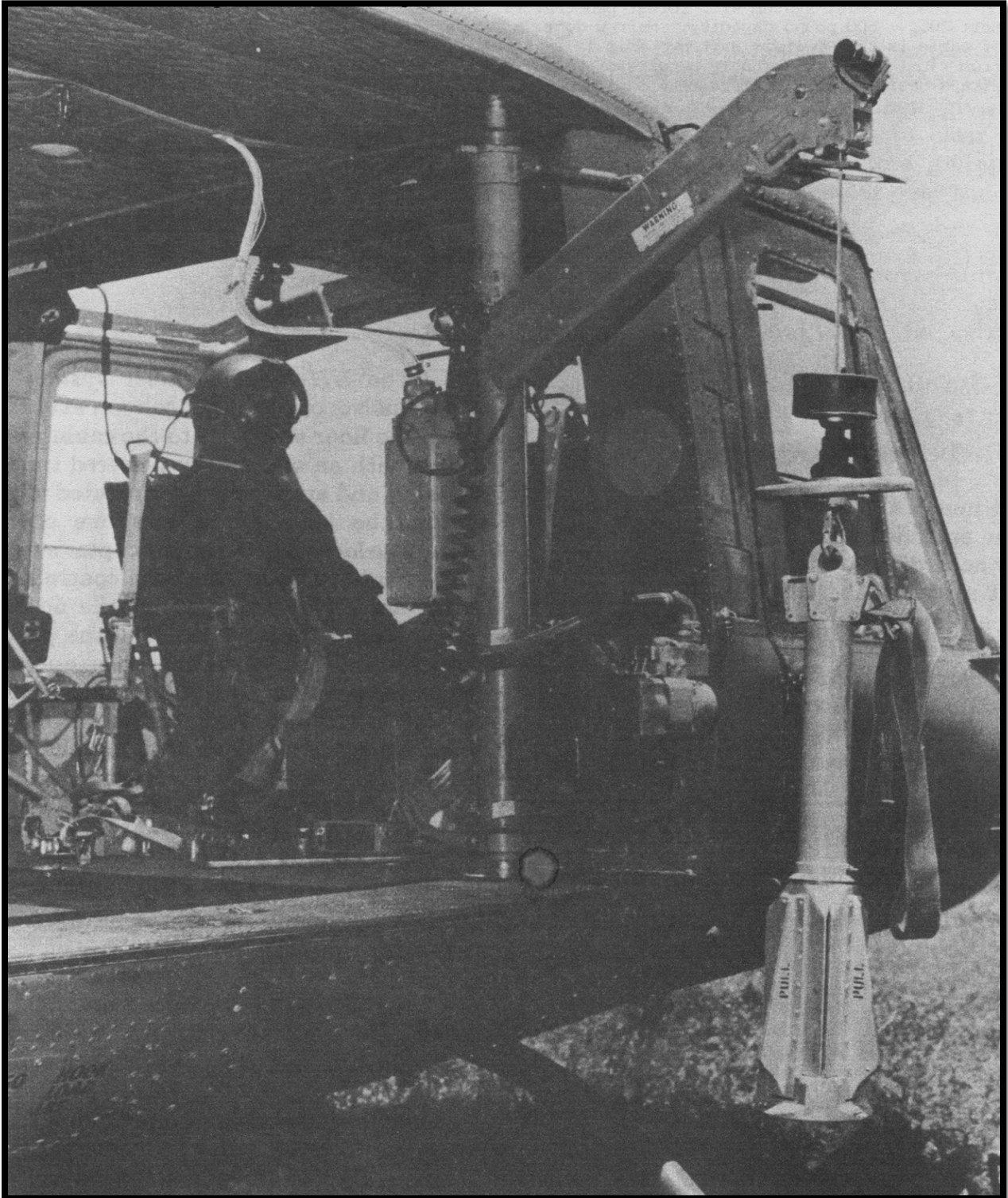
¹⁴ I might have been considerably more concerned about the valley below us had I been aware of the construction progress of some new segments of the road from the east and the intention to create a major enemy logistical bypass for Route-7.

the area, but we knew full well they would soon enter the scene. History attested to this.

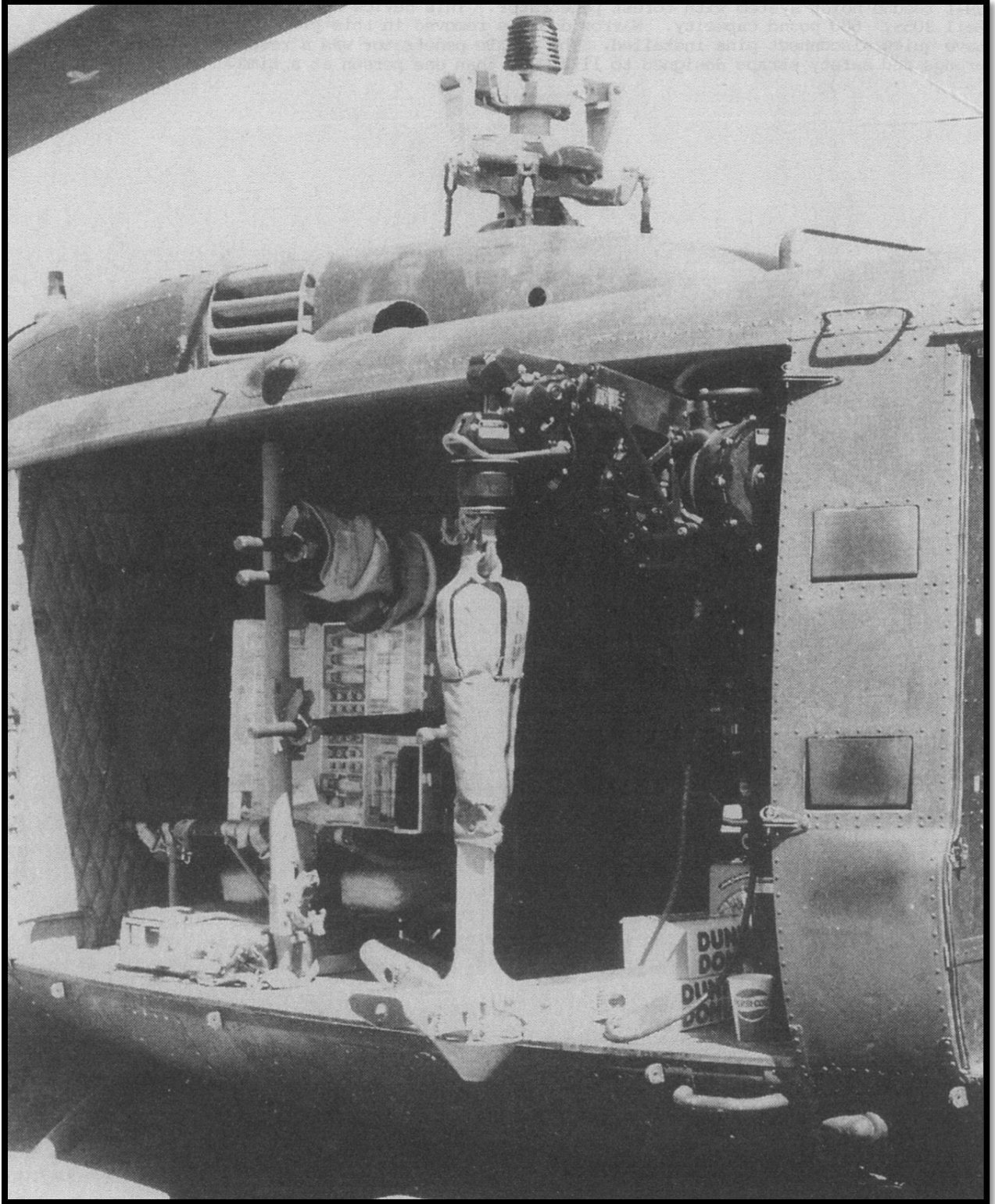
Since the terrain was rolling, uneven, covered with low brush, bushes, and not conducive to landing, a hoist recovery was indicated. In contrast to the H-34s permanent hoist and yellow horse collar, some of our 205s were equipped with a removable Cool Breeze (Breeze Eastern) hoist and a jungle penetrator. Electrically activated, this device could be independently operated by either the pilot in the cockpit or the Flight Mechanic from the cargo compartment. It was significant that we had progressed from more difficult rescue attempts that, in lieu of landing, necessitated using field expediciencies like ropes or straps to complete the job. Some of our original 204Bs came equipped with an overhead hoist system, but difficult to maintain and prone to damage, most were soon removed.

The expensive Cool Breeze winch hoist was attached to floor and roof mounts just inside the small right front cargo door behind the PIC's seat.¹⁵ During a hoist operation the small door was locked open, and the hoist apparatus rotated from the stowed position to a fixed angle forty-five degrees outside the helicopter, where the cable would clear the fuselage and skid gear to allow the lowering and raising cycle. Like the H-34, hoist cycles were time-limited to allow cooling of the winch motor. As trees were tall in Indochina, the cable was quite long and the original system incorporated provision for a manual device (squib or guillotine) that was designed to allow the crew to sever the cable at the drum should the braided wire become entangled in trees, brush, or other encumbering items.

¹⁵ Differentiating the 205-UH1D from the Bell 204B models, the 205 had been lengthened at the Hurst, Texas, factory and could easily accommodate the hoist.



The right side of a Bell UH-1D displaying the position of the rescue hoist with a semi-deployed jungle penetrator. The penetrator strap was used to secure the occupant (s). The up-limit ring and switch is located at the top of the hoist arm.



UH-1D with both the large and small cargo doors removed displaying a fully deployed hoist with attached jungle penetrator. The foldable "seat" prongs could accommodate one or more aviators.

As opposed to the ancient, but time-honored yellow horse collar, which if not worn properly could be dangerous in the hands of the uninitiated, the unique jungle penetrator was developed in the mid-1960s to accommodate more than one person and perform what the name inferred-it tended to penetrate the abundant triple canopy jungle. Of course, the Air Force had priority over the first ones manufactured. The seat was designed with three prongs; when deployed the device could accommodate two or even three individuals, if the total weight did not exceed the cable's 600 pounds tensile strength.

One downed pilot (Norton) heard us coming and moved to the best open area he could find. After making a quick pass over him to ascertain that no enemy were concealed or waiting within rifle range to bring me down, I settled into a low, steady hover facing southwest beside Captain Fred Norton and instructed Ortillo to commence deploying the hoist.

While Ortillo labored at his task, Woosley and Cates identified and went after the second pilot, who was a few hundred yards upslope in the trees. Crawford had never used a horse collar before, but quickly figured it out and had no problem as Waite reeled him into the cargo compartment.

Al returned to a hover between us while scanning the area for impending trouble and making his crew available should the situation warrant.

When the heavy penetrator neared the ground, the large man opened the device, unzipped the cover, plopped on one of the prongs, and secured himself with the nylon strap. Certain he was saved, he stowed his survival radio in a pocket of his survival vest and looked down at the ground to minimize the impact of dust and debris while preparing to be hauled into the Bell. Thinking this phase of the mission a piece of cake, I instructed Ortillo to raise the man into the cabin.

What happened next marked another first for me, poignantly evidencing that I had not experienced all there was to learn. Mainly, the aviation business was indeed a continuing learning process--nothing should ever be taken for granted. As precious seconds ticked by, I divided my attention between the cockpit and outside the aircraft looking for any unusual activity. While focused on this, unknown to me, experiencing a problem with the penetrator Ortillo attempted to wave the man off the seat. After a short time dangling just above the ground, Norton looked up and saw the Flight Mechanic motioning him to get off. He complied. The penetrator was adjusted and moved into position in front of the pilot. The Captain then returned to the seat.

The next time I looked down to my right, the penetrator and our intended "pluckee" still remained on the ground. Curious, not privy to my Flight Mechanic's problems, I asked Ortillo over the ICS why the man was not being reeled in. Complete silence. Frustrated, I kept badgering him with the same question. Were we experiencing an English problem? Finally, Ortillo answered that the up-cable reel switch was not functioning properly. I said to continue activating the up/down switch, hoping this was the cause of the problem. He indicated that he had already attempted this several times with negative results--no up or down movement. Apparently, nothing would rectify the problem. What a situation. I was over a downed pilot with a rescue assured, a plus in the ego department, and now we were unable to complete the extraction. It was the ultimate frustration.

I could not maintain a steady hover over the pilot forever and could see Al Cates hovering upslope impatiently waiting to help. Since we had exhausted the possibility of performing the job, I told Ortillo to have the pilot move off the seat. This was easier said than done, for Norton was not about to vacate the source of his salvation a second time. Believing his

recovery nearly achieved, he had turned his radio off, and to prevent dust clogging his eyes was again looking down with his arms wrapped around the penetrator's stout shaft.

I hovered there a few minutes attempting to obtain his attention. The delay seemed longer, for every second I expected ground fire to commence in our direction. I had few options. In desperation, I activated the switch to the cable cutting guillotine device. Nothing. ¹⁶ Next, I considered descending beside him to alert him to the problem, but the terrain sloped abruptly to the right and there was no excess cable extended to accomplish this. Another option was to lift the man high enough off the ground to clear obstacles and haul him a short distance downhill to a flat portion in the valley where I could land and pick him up. However, I rejected this alternative as being too dangerous for the pilot and the possibility of enemy presence.

Something had to be done quickly. With all options exhausted, I radioed Cates, and assuming we could eventually get the man off the penetrator, requested he pick up the pilot. Woosley was busy extracting his pilot, but replied that he was only too happy to help.

Then Murphy struck. The SOB was always present, only requiring the proper time and place to emerge. Marking another first during my tenure, all radio transmitters and receivers failed on my side of the cockpit, rendering me to shouting instructions to Frenchy across the centrally mounted pedestal. Oddly enough, French's radios still worked.

Finally, Norton, confused by the delay, glanced up and Ortillo conveyed to him to again depart the penetrator. Aware that something was wrong with the device, but unaware that there

¹⁶ Like the H-34s, the explosive cable cutting device in the Bells was not installed to prevent inadvertent accidents. This never changed and crew complaints always fell on Maintenance Department deaf ears.

was another helicopter hovering close by to participate, the captain was understandably reluctant to get off the seat, and was fully prepared to ride the penetrator any place I chose. Then, when he realized that I might sever the cable if he did not dismount, he complied.

Because of the weight of the cable and heavy penetrator, the slim Flight Mechanic experienced a difficult time raising the hardware into the cockpit. Therefore, to facilitate Al's extraction, I slowly hovered high toward the valley. Frenchy clearly understood the predicament. Taking the initiative and without hesitation, the Captain unstrapped and departed the cockpit to aid Ortillo. It seemed an eternity, hovering out of ground effect and exposed to the unknown, before Smith climbed back in his seat, grimacing in pain. While retrieving the cable and cumbersome penetrator, he nearly fell out the cabin door and had been struck in the leg by prongs of the metal penetrator.

By then, both pilots were safely off the ground. It was time to leave the SAR scene before sierra hit the fan.

Because of the unanticipated delay and extended hovering operation, we had consumed substantially more fuel than I anticipated. This was confirmed by the fuel gage needle fluctuating south and a winking red low-level fuel warning light on the console. If the system was properly calibrated, perhaps we had approximately thirty minutes remaining before flameout.

Frenchy, an easily agitated individual, was squirming in his seat. Unlike Smith, who had been shot down earlier in the year, I was not particularly concerned by the fuel state, for during the months-long 1969-1970 PDJ operation I had easily operated this same ship on the red light to the Lima Lima supply base, some twenty-five to thirty miles west, always arriving with fuel to spare. The total distance to Long Tieng over my planned route was nearly forty miles, perhaps less with a

favorable wind and shortcuts. All things considered, including time to ascend, weather, winds, rougher terrain, and the enemy gauntlet, I felt confident that we could achieve our destination. If not, as a last resort, we could use Padong as an alternate landing site, and if no fuel was available there, have a drum of A-1 fuel delivered to the site. Attempting to convey all this to my cockpit mate above the rotor slap and transmission noise was quite difficult, and Frenchy did not seem particularly convinced.

After departing the Xieng Khouang Valley, we proceeded southwest at a moderate altitude between Phou Kabo, where during 1963 I was hosed on my first day upcountry as a Captain, and towering Phou Sao. Intimate with the area following years of working sites there, I attempted to avoid paralleling most portions of Route-4, and when able, turned more west-southwesterly toward Site-5. I breathed considerably easier after passing these potential hot spots.

When abeam Padong, I pointed out the strip. Frenchy began shouting, waving his arms, and badgering me to land there and refuel. We were all fatigued and he was hurt, but I knew he was assuming an ultra-conservative approach to our dilemma. Moreover, by my calculations, flying the shortest route available, we were passing the site with sufficient time and fuel to continue on to Site-20A. Besides, the chances that proper jet fuel was available at Site-05 were slim, and I was unsure of the current security.

There were often diverging opinions between pilots regarding how to conduct a job. This flight was a prime example of conflicts that could arise from two Captains in the cockpit.

Naturally, as the senior man, I was in charge and made critical decisions, but at these times I wished I was flying by

myself like during the early days upcountry when I was only responsible to myself and Flight Mechanic for decision making.

I elected to continue and soon after clearing Padong Ridge, it was all downhill to The Alternate.

Our faster speed enabled us to arrive ten to fifteen minutes before the H-34 pilots. In order to take advantage of remaining fuel or fumes in the tanks, and to avoid stray enemy rockets that occasionally still fell in the valley, I landed and parked down slope close to the karst on the ramp's southeast side. While taking on fuel from the mobile tanker, Bob, the older, baldheaded Air Operations man, who had replaced Tiny when he became a Thai unit Case Officer, walked across the tarmac to our ship. After listening to our hairy story, aware that Jolly Green crews were en route, and since we had to RTB for radio repairs, he insisted that we deliver both pilots to Udorn. This was fine with me. Why should USAF AARS pogues receive credit for a recovery when Air America pilots had endured arduous battle conditions to successfully perform it? Bob's proposal was especially appealing when we learned that the Air Force pilots had had a change of heart regarding the maintenance problems upon discovering that the second set of coordinates was located in a more innocuous area.

After the H-34 pilots landed, Vang Pao's doctor conducted a quick physical assessment of Crawford and Norton. Within a few minutes, the pilots began to transfer to our ship. Scheduled to deadhead both ways that day, I switched seats with Frenchy. Highly fatigued from the stress and strain of the extraordinary SAR, I looked forward to relaxing, my only duty being to make radio calls.

The two pilots appeared fine after their ordeal, but were highly dehydrated. Extreme stress caused this. I had seen this condition before and was not at all surprised when one man



Protected by a large, partially forested karst, the Long Tieng concrete Air Operations building was situated among other structures on the lower western side of the loading-unloading parking ramp.

Author Collection.

quaffed my entire canteen without once removing it from his lips.

As Frenchy air-taxed from the parking ramp toward the runway and commenced a sharp left turn toward the runway, the flight leader of the Jolly Green contingent requested we return and relinquish our precious load. Wrong. Not wanting to engage in an unpleasant exchange over the air and sound arrogant, I somewhat tactfully responded that I had been instructed by The Alternate Customer to proceed to Udorn and I was not returning to Long Tieng.

There was no way these tardy Air Force individuals were going to strip the glory of this SAR from the people who actually performed the work. Moreover, after consultation, our two pilots concurred, indicating that we should proceed south.

After years in the field either participating in or performing rescue missions, I could only surmise what the Jolly crews were thinking and saying about Air America pilots. But I was thick-skinned and considered this a non-issue for me. After all, finally participating in a SAR from alpha to omega and returning to Udorn with two live, healthy pilots marked a first for me, after eight years with Air America. Therefore, it was with an enormous sense of accomplishment and euphoria that we ferried the jet jockeys to "home plate" to ace out a notorious foot-dragging AARS unit.¹⁷

Upon arrival at the Udorn airfield, the tower operator courteously directed us to land in the grass beside the parallel taxiway, where an Air Force reception committee consisting of

¹⁷In all fairness, the Air Force rescue unit (s) was obligated to adhere to their ultra-strict regulations-Rules of Engagement-before launching on a SAR mission. On the other hand, any delay did nothing to assist the unfortunate men on the ground, which on a really bad day could have been us.

high-level officers, squadron mates, and buckets of champagne bottles awaited the returning heroes. After the hairy mission that had initially been a "bag of worms," it was gratifying to observe the full spectrum of a successful SAR including the happy squadron mates.

We deposited the joyful aviators, and like a victorious gladiator in a Roman coliseum, or a flag draped Olympic winner circling the track, slowly air-taxed back to the Air America ramp.

After the ship was secured, I walked into the CPH office to debrief all there with details of the extraordinary and eventful SAR. This included an account about the curious and yet unresolved hoist malfunction. Wayne Knight called Chief Flight Mechanic, Gaza Eiler, to the office to listen to the story and investigate the problem. The hoist apparatus was a very expensive mechanism and its failure to properly operate, a distinct concern. Gaza, puzzled as the rest of us, returned to the line with a maintenance crew to troubleshoot the problem.

I had not quite finished having a well-deserved cool one, when Gaza entered the Club Rendezvous Bar and requested my presence on the flight line. He had solved the hoist problem and the explanation was simple, but proved somewhat embarrassing. With the cable extended its full length on the tarmac, he proceeded to demonstrate that with the small cargo compartment door not fully extended to its intended stop, and the hoist apparatus deployed and locked in position, the door contacted and interfered with the up-limit switch. This prevented cable retraction. Normally we only used the hoist to lift a barrel or two of jet fuel into the cabin, and this jamming had never been witnessed or occurred before during the heat of battle or in any phase of rescue operations. Moreover, despite our vast SAR experience, none of us had been intelligent enough to solve the

problem. Granted, the hoists were fairly new to us and we only had minimum practice utilizing them, but now after years of flying the machine, we acquired a fresh perspective regarding Bell auxiliary equipment. Fortunately, no one had been hurt, and except for some injured pride, we learned the hard way with our buddy Murphy at the helm.

I never learned what caused the radio panel failure on my side of the cockpit. Perhaps constant keying of the hoist switch by Ortillo and me caused an excessive heat buildup that led to an electrical overload.

As with the H-34 hoist system, the Maintenance Department had elected not to load the guillotine device with an explosive charge (shotgun shell) because of the possibility of inadvertent discharge. This was not generally publicized, and an item that we usually discovered after the fact, like during a SAR gone bad.

The Air Force conducted a party that night in the "O" club for the returning warriors. All of us who participated in the rescues were invited. However, I was too whipped to attend and am not sure if anyone represented our group. Unlike some of our other pilots, I did not believe in mixing socially with our military counterparts. Aside from the kinship of aviation, I did not feel much in common with them, and there was a lot of jealousy regarding the money we earned. I continued to be upset about their rules and regulations regarding SAR operations, allowing too much time to elapse before launching, and their airborne control's poor reporting of coordinates. Keeping my distance, I did not wish any of this to rub off on me.

On 23 May CPH Knight composed and then disseminated a letter of commendation to each of the crewmembers participating in the convoluted rescue:

"Your combined efforts resulting in the successful rescue of two downed airmen on 19 May 1970 embodies nearly all facets of your qualifications as Air America Rotary Wing Crew Members. This particular effort on 19 May as complicated tremendously by unfavorable weather and activities of hostile elements, however, these obstacles were overcome and two lives were saved as a direct result of your competence.

I take this occasion to commend and thank all of you.

Well done!"

Although largely unknown to a majority of us, our efforts were greatly appreciated by some USAF personnel in the 7th Air Force ABCCC control center in Udorn, who were aware of our capability and success rate. As one high ranking officer relayed to an accomplished author:

"ABCCC was important in SAR and was responsible for most rescues in northern Laos. They monitored 119.1, the Air America frequency. 'We monitor Air America and if a pilot went down, the faster you got them out the better our chances were. Very few we got out after spending a night or two out there.' The sky was full of Air America helicopters up there and most of the rescues made in Barrel roll were made by Air America...Some people badmouthed Air America [crewmembers] that they're overpaid but they earn every penny they get-or in my books-and they did a fine job. They rescued most of our people and they got nothing extra for rescuing a pilot. That's part of their duty and they zigged into those hot areas to do it. When they zigged in, they usually did it without A-1 [support]. They come, get them out

and get out fast. That was our best rescue system." ¹⁸

We continued to lose aircraft. On the day of our SAR, new Captain FG Steele departed Long Tieng southeast in marginal weather, and conducted a right turn toward the west with a mission in the Sam Tong area. While attempting to fly through a narrow open area between a karst and hill, he encountered a smaller opening than envisioned and lowering clouds. Not believing sufficient clearance existed to effect a 180 degree turn, Steele commenced a climb on instruments. Shortly after entering IFR conditions, Hotel-49's main rotor blades contacted trees. The aircraft plunged toward a thirty-degree slope on the west side of Skyline. After ground contact, the helicopter skidded 200 feet down slope, ending up against a large tree. Immediately after Steele and Flight Mechanic RC Bundalian exited the ship it caught fire and was destroyed.

A CIA bulletin summarized and speculated regarding Long Tieng's future:

"In recent weeks General Vang Pao's guerrillas [with outside help] have secured Long Tieng Valley from all but minor enemy harassment, and substantial numbers of civilians have begun returning to the area. For the most part, North Vietnamese troops have been reacting to, rather than initiating, ground

18 Segment Sources:

Allen Cates article, *Bull Whip 01*.

03/23/88 Letter to Cates from Tim Castle Regarding the Crew of Bullwhip-01.

Cates Emails, 03/09/14, 03/12/14 (3),
03/14/14 (2).

Fred Norton Emails, 03/14/14 (3), 03/15/14.

Cy Crawford Emails, 3/17/14 (3), 3/18/14 (2).

EW Knight Email, 10/30/00, Problems with the Up-limit Rescue Hoist Switch.

Bill Leary 1971 Notes, Interview with Colonel Robert K. McCutchen, who was assigned to the 7th Air Force C-130 Airborne Command and Control Center Udorn, Thailand.

actions. In addition, the communists' extended supply lines into the Long Tieng area are vulnerable to ground harassment, and heavy rains are only a few weeks away.

The threat against Vang Pao is still considerable, however, the recent seizure of several government positions within rocket range of Long Tieng demonstrates that the enemy still retains an offensive capability. In addition, the upsurge in communist military activity in south Laos has caused Vang Pao to send some 1,500 men there, and his positions in the Long Tieng area remain vulnerable to sapper attacks.

If Vang Pao succeeds in clearing the area south of the Plaine, he can sit tight for the rainy season, consolidate his hold around Long Tieng, and give his troops a much-needed respite. Such a course could conceivably return the fighting in the north to the pre-1969 ground rules, when the Plaine was more or less a communist sanctuary, but the communists refrained from driving toward Long Tieng and the Meo heartland.

This course runs the risk, however, of allowing the communists to maintain forward positions on the Plaine from which they could mount a fresh offensive toward Long Tieng in the fall."

Following a meritorious day off, on Wednesday I returned to The Alternate in Papa Fox Hotel with Tod Yourglich to support defensive measures there.

Robertson, Anderson, and I crewed PFH to Long Tieng on the 22nd.

Jarina deadheaded to Alternate on Hotel-64 to join Charlie Weitz and Bennie Shaffer on the same day. It was a short day for Mike, with a refugee shuttle from Phu Cum to Moung Oum (LS-22). Located just east of, and in the foothills of Phu Bia, Site-22 was part of a large refugee complex that was developed over the years and stretched past Moung Cha (LS-113) and far south.



Moung Oum, Laos (LS-22) original Momentum site and refugee complex at the base of and east of Phu Bia.
Wayne Knight Collection.



Another photo of Moung Oum just to the west of the strip depicting the harsh terrain and slash and burn agriculture. Trail at upper right leads to another site and the end of the valley.

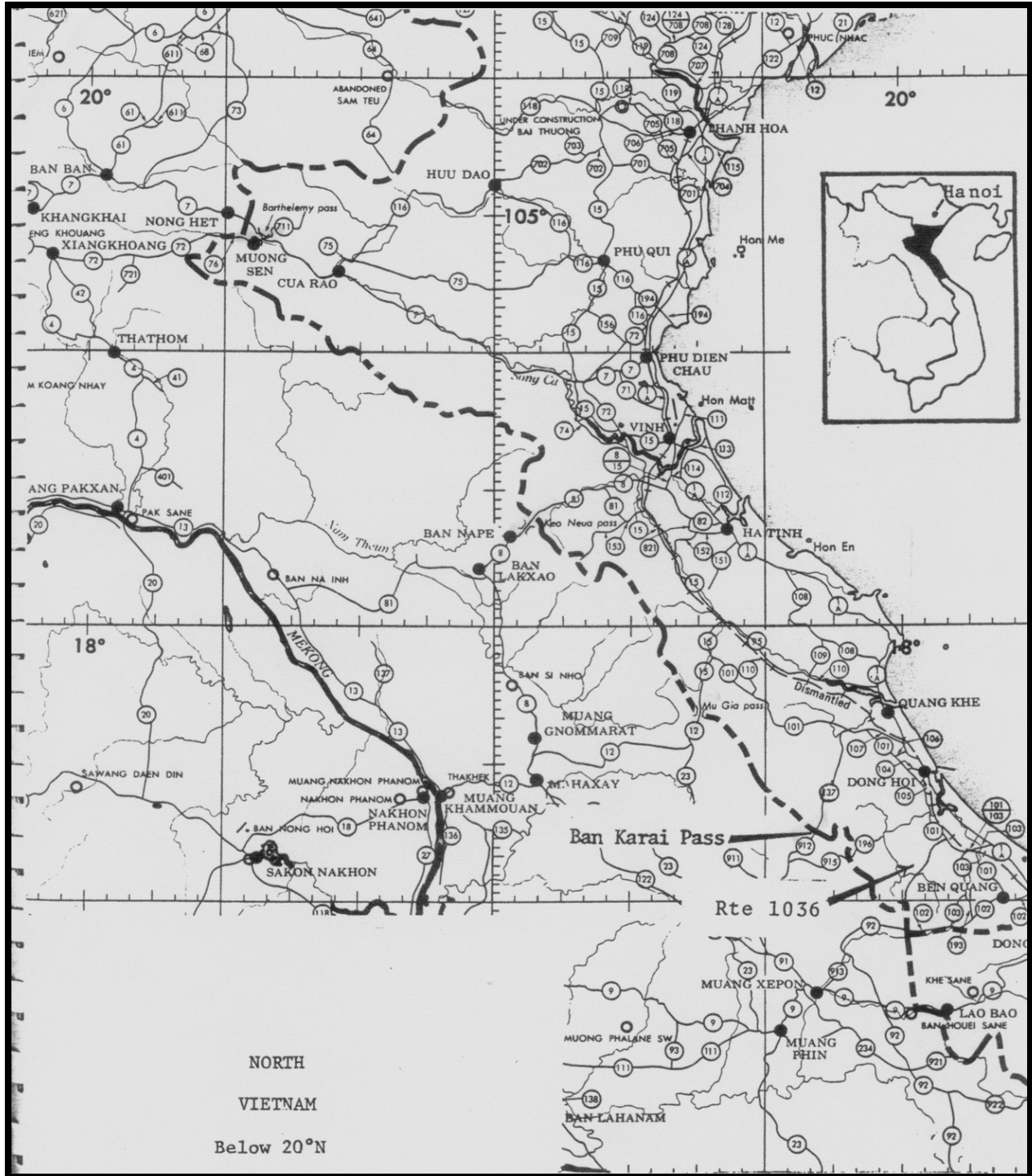
Knight Collection.

Because of its proximity to Tha Vieng and Route-4, it also formed a valuable forward listening mechanism on the eastern flanks of Long Tieng.

THE RAID OF NO RETURN

Since LBJ's termination of the northern campaign, USAF bombing restrictions applied to the Lao-North Vietnamese border. However, with the increased enemy 1970 offensives the buffer areas were reevaluated and were thereafter steadily and appreciably shrunk, particularly along Route-7 leading to Barthelemy Pass. These new rules-of-engagements provided a sanction to eliminate some formerly inviolate Vietnamese storage and rally areas. However, since bombing North Vietnam was still generally off-limits, a huge logistic area existed seven miles southwest of Barthelemy Pass at Moung Sen. Materials staged there were destined to support enemy troops engaged in operations on and around the Plain of Jars. Recent intelligence indicated that tanks were concentrated at the depot, which could be introduced into Military Region Two along the Route-7 LOC or the newly created Route-72 at an appropriate time.

Marking somewhat of a first for us in this area, but in line with Kissinger and others in the Nixon Administration's aspirations to take the war to the enemy, Agency plans were conceived and went forward to clandestinely attack and attempt to destroy these tanks by tapping specially trained indigenous ground forces--the Commando Raiders--for the job. As an adjunct and enhancement of the SGU program, in late 1968 elite units were formed from individuals who displayed aggressiveness and talent to conduct advanced work in the form of *"ambushes, prisoner snatches, bomb damage assessments, airborne pathfinder duties, and cross-border missions."* To effect these goals,



The upper left-hand corner of the map displays the location of Route-7 in Military Region Two from Ban Ban to Barthelemy Pass and the Mung Sen supply center inside North Vietnam. The Commando Raider team was inserted a few miles northwest of the Pass. A dotted line marks the boundary between Laos and Vietnam. The solid black line along the Mekong River denotes the Thai/Lao border.

multi-week training was conducted by U.S. Special Forces and Agency experts at the large Phits Camp complex in western Thailand. Graduates of the program produced mixed results from a variety of attempted missions.

The eighteen-man team selected for the undertaking was first trained at Pits Camp and then at Phou Khao (LS-14). In early March 1970, members of the unit were flown to Attopeu to bolster runway defense and demonstrate Vang Pao's cooperation in shifting troops to other military regions. With Saravane also under enemy pressure, they were next transferred to Lima-44. Their temporary field work in the south complete, the unit returned to Pha Khao in time to contribute to the seizure of Sam Tong. During April they underwent concentrated 60mm mortar training for the projected Mounng Sen mission. Four Bell crews blocked into the Air America facility early on the 23rd. I was assigned to fly Papa Foxtrot Juliet with Mike Jarina and Jay Meyers. After arriving at Long Tieng, we were directed to Phou Khao, where our crews loaded twenty-one Vietnamese-dressed Commando Raiders, four mortar tubes, base plates, M72 LAW rocket launchers, ammunition, and other supplies critical to the mission. One aircraft, designated as SAR, was empty.

Our armada headed to Phu Cum to stage, refuel, and await the arrival of escort planes. During the process Ken Wood complained to mission leader, Charlie Weitz, his 205 would not keep up with the rest of us. Therefore, Weitz instructed Mike to join Wood, and Billy Pearson would fly with me. Because of the airborne speed deficiency, Mike would depart prior to the rest of us and fly a predetermined heading; we would overtake him en route before he reached the designated area.

Despite the plan, we never caught up with Jarina, so he had to circle and wait. Another member of the flight, Robbie Robertson, unaware of the aircraft and pilot switch, was upset

over the unauthorized maneuver, something that might have compromised the mission. Later, he chastised Mike until discovering the actual reason.

The drop off point was almost sixty miles southeast of Site-50, southeast of LS-201, and northwest of Barthelemy Pass. The insertion was conducted without incident, and the troops set out for the target area. The goal was envisioned to require a few days to complete, and withdraw.

For several days all went well for the team, then sierra hit the fan...

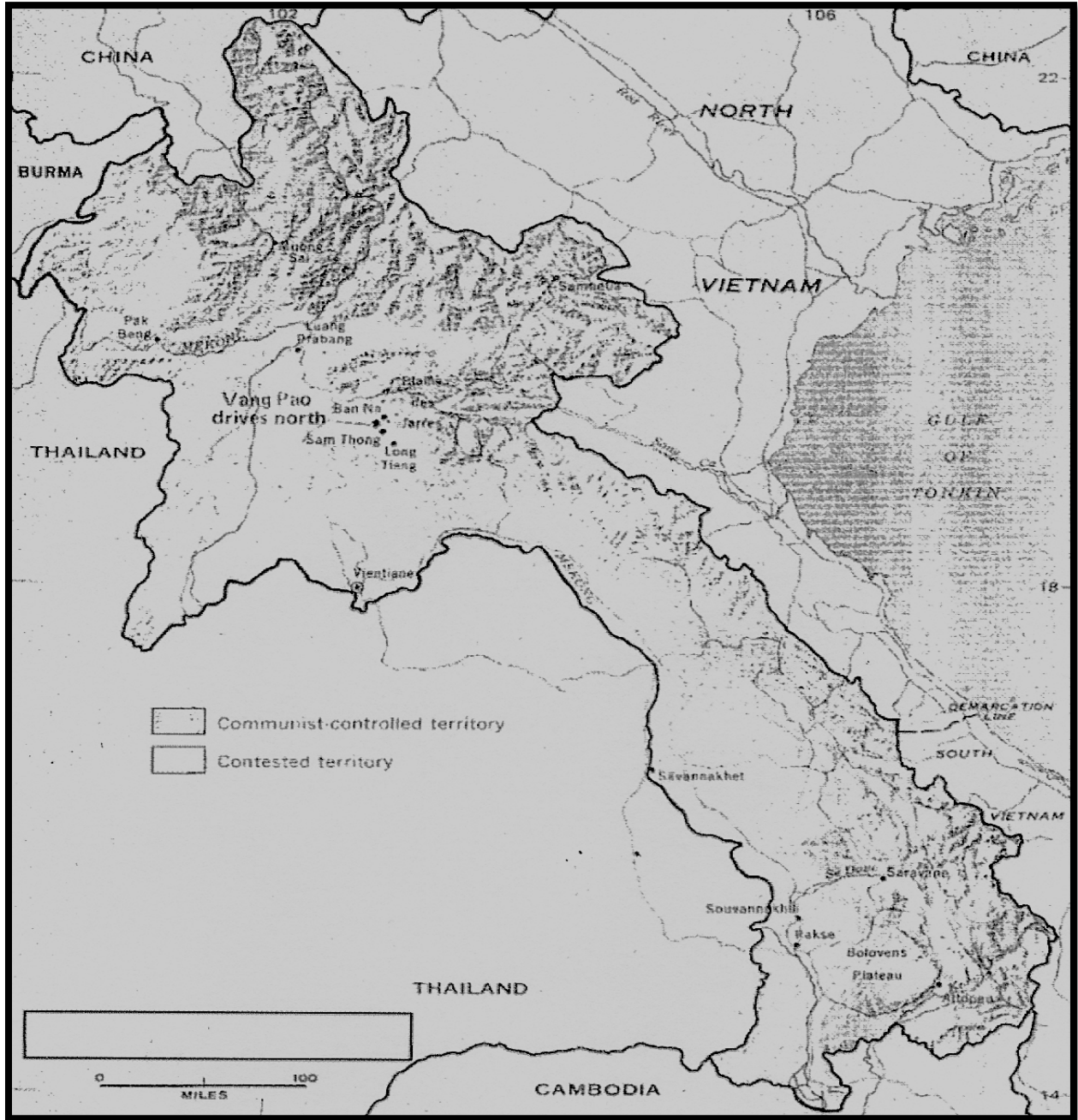
After the infiltrations all Bell crews returned to their respective assignments. I was assigned to work positions north of Long Tieng. At 1630 hours, just before time to RTB Udorn, there was troops-in-contact (TIC) at India Delta. I reported this to a Raven pilot and Raven-29 directed an A-1 Zorro flight on the enemy.

The day following the raider mission, flying Papa Foxtrot Juliet, I worked a full day at The Alternate with Flight Mechanic Demindal, moving troops north for an operation.

Ever aggressive, expecting an enemy offensive, Vang Pao decided it was time to retake the entire Ban Na area. Aside from its strategic position commanding the northern flank of the Sam Tong-Long Tieng complex, Site-15 shared historical value as one of the original Meo sites during the early war to contain communist inroads toward Vientiane.

The operation began early on the 27th with elements of three under strength battalions from Military Region Two and Military Region Three. Initially encountering little resistance, the units advanced rapidly. By the end of the first day, they had reached high ground four miles from their objective.

Bad weather suffused the area and further movement north on Thursday was greeted by an entrenched enemy determined to reject



Government wet season movement toward Ban Na (Lima Site-15) in MR-2.
CIA Map, 05/28/70.

any offensive. TIC was reported by Raven-45, who worked a single flight of A-1 Fireflies. Lacking abundant air to ease the way, government force wilted and the push on Ban Na failed.

Earlier in the day TIC had been reported at Moug Soui. Despite deteriorating weather, A-1 pilots destroyed four bunkers. There was also TIC at Houei Tong Ko.

Deadheading on Papa Foxtrot Gulf (PFG), I went upcountry with Ken Wood and Ben Shaffer. Supporting the second day of the Site-15 operation, we conducted a Special Mission east to the Tango Yankee pad. It was my final contribution for the month, finishing with 109 hours and eighteen Special Missions.

Jarina was not finished. On Friday he and Shaffer took PFG to The Alternate, and during the twenty-seven-landing day worked at Moug Nham (LS-63), twelve miles east of Tha Thom, and at Moug Oum.

30 May, Dick Elder, Ben Shaffer, and Mike returned to Long Tieng in PFG. They were first assigned to work in the Site-50 area. Part of the job entailed positioning to support or extract the Commando Raider team then under duress from enemy patrols. The crew of Golf completed the upcountry work in the Site-72 environs.

Jarina finished his monthly flying with over 113 hours and 150 hours in a thirty-day period.

AIR AMERICA MOVIE

For some time, the no-nonsense Managing Director of Air America, George Doole, had been unhappy with the unprofessional image portrayed in various factions of the media. He particularly disliked the pejorative term "bush pilot," as it applied to our aviators. CPH Knight once heard George unleash a severe tongue lashing to someone for using the expression describing our operation.

Therefore, hoping to enhance our reputation and convey a sense of professionalism to our organization, Doole conceived a plan to have a movie filmed.

Late in 1969 and early 1970, he concluded an agreement with a Washington, D.C. movie firm, John Willheim Productions, to produce what became *Flying Men, Flying Machines*.

On the day of our Raider insertion, while training Sompong locally in Hotel-64, Knight participated in a helicopter segment of the forthcoming movie. After completion and editing, Wayne was informed that the movie was made available to various Congressional committees, but not to the rank-and-file employee.¹⁹

SARAVANE

In order to expand their logistic routes westward toward population centers in south Laos that were generally off limits or restricted to U.S bombing, the Vietnamese had to seize Saravane and destroy the forward Pakse Site (PS) listening posts and SGU sites in the area that contributed to intelligence and ground interdiction.

The provincial capital at Lima-44 was the locus of important roads. It formed a junction for Route-23, a road that ran southerly across the Plateau and northward to the communist logistical center at Tchepone. Route-16 led west and south to Khong Sedone on Route-13, and thence to Pakse. To the north of Saravane in the Toumlan Valley lay an important segment of the Trail system.

¹⁹ Extracts from ABCCC Reports.
Mike Jarina Interviews.
EW Knight Email.
I never saw the Air America movie until later years.

After Attopeu fell, none of the thousands of civilians and the one FAR battalion (BV-41) defending or living in the area doubted the communists' intent to capture the site. Like the policy at Attopeu, so as not to foment animosity from the Vietnamese, government forces previously conducted little combat in the Toumlan Valley and further north to threaten the LOCs. Consequently, to use a military term, they were simply overcome by events (OBE).

By 10 May, with portions of two enemy battalions reputedly increasing pressure on the capital, a substantial number of civilians were evacuated. This was followed by the relocation of Royal Lao government administrative principals to Khong Sedone.

The RLG defense minister publicly admitted the military's concern regarding the communists' increased aggression in southern Laos. Saravane was the enemy's target in order to strengthen their supply routes into South Vietnam and Cambodia. Therefore, he suggested it would be in the South Vietnamese interests to sever the Ho Chi Minh Trail system. ²⁰

Also closely watching the situation deteriorate, by 26 May, General Phasouk ordered all remaining civilians removed from the

²⁰ Not a new concept, in lieu of and to supplement air interdiction, it was a consideration proposed during General Westmoreland's tenure at MACV in Saigon. However, it was deemed an overly ambitious operation, requiring at least two divisions of non-existent troops and supporting materiel. The plan was tabled for years. After the Cambodian logistic machine was disrupted and the advent of expanded trails in Laos, the issue again arose in early December 1970, when Commanding General Abrams' staff reevaluated blocking the Trails at the Tchepone logistic hub using South Vietnamese forces. Talks continued between MACV Abrams and CINCPAC McCain regarding coordinated air-ground attacks to sever primary enemy LOCs. This subject will be more fully addressed toward the end of this book.

area. As a precaution, he also *"placed the Pakse and Souvannakhili garrisons on full alert..."*

The considerable RLAFF T-28 support provided was not sufficient to slow or stop the enemy advance. Moreover, there were not enough ground assets to counter the foe, and the few there were largely combat naive. Under strength FAR troops were fatigued, and morale was low because of the superior numbers of enemy reportedly moving toward them. With these negative aspects impacting the northern region and General Phasouk's prior knowledge of the enemy's timetable for the impending attack, the commanding officer of Military Region Four was unable to wrest permission for an orderly withdrawal from Souvanna Phouma, who wanted the provincial capital "retained for political reasons."

Despite minor artillery support from the northeast at the LS-171 SGU road watch training base, with foul weather impacting the area and impeding T-28 support, Saravane was lost on 9 June. Overwhelmed by coordinated enemy attacks, not much government resistance occurred, as the FAR garrison withdrew without most rolling stock toward Nong Boua (LS-134), located almost nine miles east on Route-162. After rallying there, the unit reversed its march and began advancing slowly toward Saravane the following day. Two companies from Khong Sedone were lifted by Air America and Royal Lao Air Force H-34 crews to high ground northwest of L-44, with orders to proceed toward the capital and join with the eastern unit. The troops failed to link, and the counterattack was further stymied by the enemy's superior firepower. By week's end the units abandoned the field to an enemy intent on consolidating their gains and clearing the entire area of government forces.

Prior to striking back, Pakse base Raven pilots air dropped leaflets informing remaining civilians that the town would be retaken by RLAFF efforts. Raids followed on suspected enemy

command posts. Unsubstantiated intel later indicated that a Vietnamese general had been killed in the attacks.

USAF Rules of Engagement changed directly after the fall of Saravane:

"United States air operations by slow mover aircraft, gunships, and flare ships are authorized within the Saravane five-kilometer restricted area in direct support of ground forces and against clearly defined military targets of opportunity. No fast movers will enter the five-kilometer restricted area. All targets must be validated by either AIRA Savannakhet, a FAC with X-ray, or a FAG prior to a strike. All strikes will be under control of FAC/FAG. FAC aircraft must have X-ray or be in visual contact with the ground. Strikes will not be conducted within 500 meters of villages unless receiving AAA (14.5mm ZPU or larger) fire from the ville. Groundfire being received from the airstrip at Saravane may be returned. Caution will be practiced not to destroy the strip. The town of Saravane will not be struck under any circumstance. Napalm is approved for TIC and may be authorized by either AIRA Savannakhet or AIR Pakse. All A/C not in direct support of ground operations within the five-kilometer circle [strike box] will continue to avoid L-44 by five kilometers and 5,000 feet AGL."

To supplement Pakse's RLAF assets, within three days of the loss, two T-28s, an AC-47 gunship, and associated ground and flight personnel arrived TDY at the base. This movement marked a first for the unit.

Unlike previous commanders, Lieutenant Colonel Khouang, wing and base commander since 1969, demanded discipline and correct military conduct from his personnel. As a result, morale in the Lima-11 RLAF was high and the prevailing "let the Americans do it" attitude ceased. We old timers knew and respected Khouang, for he was one of the first H-34 pilots

trained in 1963. Some of us had participated in missions together like the Crown Prince trip to Vang Vieng after the successful Triangle Operation.

The loss of two provincial capitals and a few sites on the Bolovens Plateau's eastern rim should have stimulated serious trepidation in the Military Region Four command structure. Instead, not fully understanding the importance of maintaining the delicate balance of power, it was viewed with an Asian fatalistic attitude of merely contributing to an extension of the logistical trail system leading to South Vietnam and Cambodia. The leaders also rationalized that it was not their problem, but that of outside interests. Employing Socratic wrong logic, few government casualties resulted in exchange for the loss of substantial territory.

Following the loss of Attopeu and the impending evacuation of Saravane, toward the end of May Ambassador Godley was stimulated to assess U.S. policy in Laos:

"The dilemma for Laos and for U.S. policy in Laos is that in the absence of an overall political settlement in Indochina U.S. military disengagement will occur through successfully transferring the burden of the war to the states of the region... 'Vietnamization.' In Laos there is no name, no process and no inherent capability to defend itself against its large neighbors. Laos will always have to play one against the other and also rely on strong friends outside the area. It can, however, develop greater internal strength and cohesiveness and must do so if it is to survive. U.S. policy should encourage this by developing to a greater extent than before and integrated program of military and civilian assistance to Laos...

Laos is infinitely less self-reliant than any other state in Indochina because it is weak militarily and economically;

unawakened politically, and possesses limited resources of skilled and unskilled manpower to develop economic or social momentum."

CONCERNS AT HOME

There were serious health problems at home. Our son Rick had another seizure, but it was entirely different from the previous one in severity or tangible reason. Although he still incurred periodic throat problems, there was no high temperature with this event. He spent a day in the Air Force hospital for observation and tests, without a definitive answer to his problem. A suggestion was made to undergo an electroencephalograph (EEG) examination that was not available in our area. I would have to attend to this in Bangkok. ²¹

After being immunized for measles, Peter contracted the disease. So much for modern medicine. Furthermore, Tuie did not feel well. So many family illnesses caused us to abandon plans for our southern trip.

On top of these problems, marking a first, the Company temporarily canceled all STO and leaves because of heavy work commitments. Then they indicated that we could take leave, but only for a month, hardly worth the effort.

ANIMAL BAR

During early 1970, to accommodate more aggressive types who needed to blow off steam, another bar was built replacing Ben Moore's original room. Because almost anything was tolerated

²¹Aspiring pilots had this mandatory brain wave test performed in Pensacola as a permanent record against the time they might sustain a head injury in an aircraft crash.

there and management types normally avoided it, the Animal Bar became quite popular.

We all had memories of the place. Wayne Knight recalled rolling around on the floor while playing liars dice with Don Henthorn. Broken glasses were common during spates of excessive exuberance. He often received an inter-office memo from Dick Ford after these infractions, even though he was aware that nothing would be done.

The Author recalls a bizarre incident when a pilot, well in his cups, was sitting on the bar in the right corner. Bemoaning past errors, he removed his Buck knife from its sheath and flicked it open. Then he flipped his penis out on the bar top and debated severing the shaft. Despite heightened anticipation by all present, there was no blood spilled that night.

Annual Indianapolis 500 races were held in the States on 30 May. Jack Knotts, originally from Indiana and a Purdue University graduate, had always attended the races when in America.

Sometime prior to the event, Jack and Don Franks, who transferred from Saigon about a month after Knotts, were in the Animal Bar watering hole. During the course of conversation, they decided it would be a great idea to create an Indy pool. There were always thirty-three cars in the contest, so they fashioned a checkerboard type of flat surface containing an entry slot for individual cars. Then they solicited a hundred baht for each selection. The first-place car would determine who won the entire 3,300 pot. Initially, they only sold blocks to bar patrons.

Since arriving in Udorn, Jack had never met CJ Abadie or been to either his or Dick Ford's office in the Administration/Operations building. As there were still blank entries available, emboldened by adult beverages, he charged up

the stairs and into Ab's office. Jack, still a relatively new guy and completely naive about how to conduct relations with Abadie, informed the manager that he required one hundred baht for the Indy pool. Since it was the first time either man had encountered the other, Ab was totally confused by the man and his request. Ford, curious over the banter, came out of the adjoining office. Taking advantage of the situation, Knotts then solicited baht from both men. Probably to get rid of him, the men handed over red notes.

Echoing the Diane Elder flap during the early days of Club Rendezvous, when Abe Rivera fashioned and introduced group bingo and Diane won the games, Don Franks won the pot. Because Don was a co-conspirator in creating the game, Jack feared all the participants would assume the contest was rigged and they would

be fired. ²²

²²Segment Sources:

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 237,244, 261-262, 275.
 05/02/70 CIA Bulletin, Communist forces have harassed Long Tieng with rocket fire, but no major fighting has been reported there....
 Mike Jarina Interviews.
 Mike Jarina Letter.
 Project Get Out and Walk: Ejections and Bailouts, 1970-Internet.
 Rules of Engagement; Leeker, 96W, H-76-Somewhat erroneous accounts of the Tiger-01 SAR.
 Air America Flight Information Center Activity Report, N1196W-Roger Stock, 04/07/70.
 11/14/11 Email to Judy Porter Regarding the SAR.
 Wayne Knight Email, 07/02/00.
 EW Knight May Flight Records.
 05/01/70 CIA Bulletin, Laos: communist forces remain in control of Attopeu Town, and fresh communist action has been reported in the Bolovens Plateau area.
 05/07/70 CIA Bulletin, Laos.
 Blout, *CHECO, Air Operations in Northern Laos 1 April-1 November 1970*, 10-12.
 Joe Leeker, Hotel-49.
 Bill Leary May 1970 Notes Pertaining to the Steele Crash. Unlike Joe Leeker, Leary listed the incident on 30 May.
 John Willheim 12/26/69 Letter to George Doole Regarding the Air America movie, *Flying Men, Flying Machines*.
 EW Knight Emails, 10/26/00 to Include his May Flight Time, 10/30/00.
 05/20/70 CIA Bulletin, Time is running against the communists at Long Tieng, but a new push against this government stronghold cannot be ruled out.
 Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 351.
 05/28/70 CIA Intelligence Bulletin. General Vang Pao has opened a three-battalion drive against Ban Na, but the communists may soon launch an attack of their own in this area.
 Soutchay Vongsavanh, 56-57.
 John Pratt, *CHECO, RLAF*, 117-118.
 John Pratt, *Vietnam Voices*, 431.
 Jack Knotts Interviews.
 Clay *CHECO*. 91.

"The war in the other country is slowing down in my area [MR-2]. We still come home every night and the main trouble is with the weather."

06/16/70 Letter Home.

For some time the Savannakhet Agency unit had an abundance of road watch team missions planned and programmed, but these were in abeyance for lack of helicopter support because regional priorities ruled AB-1's allocation of Bell assets. This was also the case for USAID, RO, and other in country agencies. At this time, CPH Knight received daily calls from individual principals, always insisting **their** requirements deserved top priority. Therefore, Wayne was too embroiled in attempting to supply helicopters to a very demanding group of users, to allow him to plan beyond the immediate requirement. Even Bill Leonard's appointment in Vientiane to a central clearing house scheduler for all Customers failed to completely alleviate the confusing situation. In the end, AB-1 air section and its associated units maintained priority for aircraft designation, but Agency people also needed to decide priority status within their amoeba like group.

UPCOUNTRY

With the situation in the Long Tieng area somewhat stabilized, after blocking in at 0530 hours, Dick Elder, Bobby Barrow, and I crewed Papa Foxtrot Gulf to Lima-39 on the first. I was delegated to deadhead the fifty-five minutes it took to arrive at the river site. Before retiring to the hostel for the

night, along with another Bell crew, we completed three Special Missions. The RON there marked my first in a long time.

The same day Mike Jarina and Jay Meyers were scheduled for a Long Tieng commute (LTC) in Papa Foxtrot Juliet. After twenty-one landings in The Alternate area, they RTB Udorn.

Monday, flying less than half a day, because of foul weather, we conducted one Special Mission out of Savannakhet. Returning late to Udorn, I was again obliged to deadhead (D/H). Sometimes, even after being at the controls, I discovered later that I had been accorded deadhead time. The deadhead system had been in effect for a long time, but in addition to lessening the pay impact on the Customer, the deadhead practice was also a blatant excuse to keep pilots under the Company-mandated hundred flight hours to satisfy FAA regulations. It did not seem right, for the missions were Customer generated and we were not working Stateside under FAA auspices. The quest to claim that we were professionals and not bush pilots was often laughable. We were what we were. The hundred-hour target required much shifting of people and proved an enormous burden for the scheduling operation. In order to reduce a problem largely caused by double crew requirements, hiring was underway with the intention of reducing all helicopter pilots to no more than seventy hours per month and perhaps dilute union loyalty. If successful, June would likely be the final month of high flight time.

After blocking in fairly late and with Papa Foxtrot Gulf undergoing an overnight inspection, I was picked up Tuesday morning by the Company bus driver an hour or so later than normal. Jarina and Barrow were waiting to crew the ship with me. I was again delegated to deadhead both ways to and from Alternate. During the day, conducting thirteen landings, we supported troops and positions in the Site-72 and Sam Tong areas.

On the fourth, after a minor delay, Robertson, Terry Dunn, and I headed north in Papa Foxtrot Juliet. Once again, I was accorded D/H pay both ways. With adverse weather impeding operations around Long Tieng, we did not accomplish much work.

Jarina, Billy Pearson, and Barrow went to Sam Tong in Papa Foxtrot Gulf. Assigned to work the Phu Cum area and later Site-72, they managed a somewhat better day.

With the weather slightly improved, Jay Meyers and I spent my birthday, the fifth, in The Alternate area flying support missions in Papa Foxtrot Hotel.

Rotating Special Missions in Military Region Three, Robertson, Jarina, Barrow and another Bell crew flew to Thakhet (LS-40) east and then west (LS-40A) to conduct two missions. They stopped at Paksane before returning to Udorn.

COMMANDO RAIDERS FATE

Evidenced by numerous failures over the years, there were few successful ground-oriented penetrations of North Vietnam by Agency-trained Lao--at least missions anyone was willing to discuss. ¹ Colonel Tong, was the FAR commanding officer of a mixed ethnic force in upper Military Region Two before he was gut shot during a mission into Son La Province in June 1965, and later expired. He once told me that he had previously walked through much of the North Vietnam northwest military region. He did not elaborate, but since early cross border operations in Sam Neua were not sanctioned by the Agency for political reasons, I assumed that he was either prevaricating or recruiting, but Meo, Black Tai, and other ethnic groups living along the border regions had extended families that lived in both countries and exchanged goods and intelligence.

¹Even today, preferring to only admit failures, the Agency rarely discusses successful operations.

Many of these diverse racial groups were incorporated into the North Vietnamese Army and tasked to patrol the borders. The many identification signs, signals, and use of tracking dogs made it virtually impossible for someone who was not cognizant of them to remain undetected long. Knowing this, the Agency was careful to prepare missions with a reasonable chance of success, but no matter how much the teams were schooled and trained with the latest penetration information and skills, there was always some unforeseen item or breach of security to expose them as interlopers.

As an added precaution for safety from detection, the team we dropped off on the 23rd was told to maintain radio silence. After the attack on Moung Sen and withdrawal to Laos, the leader would call in the blind at prearranged times stating his progress and intended location for an extraction.

After two weeks passed without team contact, it was assumed the men were lost and would not return. Moreover, area searches by fixed wing revealed nothing.

Then on the fifth, radio contact was briefly established. Except that the team was moving west, no other information was forthcoming. A Porter with the mission Customer onboard was dispatched and ascertained that an unspecified number of team members had indeed moved northwest from the border. Pursued by enemy patrols, they were disoriented and moving westerly through unfamiliar terrain. The word was passed through AB-1 air operations to Knight's office, and an emergency exfiltration was mounted to extract the surviving men.

Unaware of the exact number to be retrieved, four Bell crews launched north on the sixth. Two were double crewed. Leader Scratch Kanach departed for Alternate in Papa Foxtrot Hotel. I was in Papa Foxtrot Juliet with Robbie and Terry Dunn.

Mike Jarina and Demandal crewed Papa Foxtrot Gulf, and Billy Pearson was piloting another Bell.

The team's exact location was still not established, so we were sent to Phu Cum with instructions to work the immediate area, but to remain in contact with the area Customer until alerted for the exfil.

Later, in order to minimize weather problems and to provide better access the projected landing zone area, we relocated east to Sam Son Hong (LS-201), a preferred site for Special Missions since losing most of upper Military Region Two. Then, when the "team" was identified and pinpointed, we were informed and launched to join the other Bells.

Since threatening weather might impede the mission, while at Site-50 Scratch privately told Mike to leave his helicopter at Phu Cum and fly with Billy P. Despite Pearson's considerable experience in rotorcraft, the former U.S. Army Ranger was not instrument qualified. Scratch considered instrument flight might be required to complete the mission. He also knew Mike, as a former instructor in both helicopter and fixed wing aircraft, was a well-qualified instrument pilot. ²

² Billy Pearson entered the helicopter program when the early U.S. Army helicopter syllabus did not embrace instrument training. As helicopter systems and electronics evolved to a more advanced state that training was included.

Actually, since no formal instrument training was conducted in Air America, none of us were really considered that proficient flying instruments. Therefore, aside from necessity and innate ability to scan the instrument console, dividing our attention in the cockpit between monitoring the gages and outside, unless someone individually practiced the most basic instrument flying during the smoky season (needle ball-airspeed) or at other times, we were not legally qualified. Moreover, it was imperative to know one's limitations. With inherently unstable and unreliable aircraft, or no navigation aids to guide a person, some who considered themselves expert instrument pilots, who never considered or forgot about "the rocks in the mountains," died.



Robbie Robertson and the mustachioed Author to the right taking a break during a rare moment out of the cockpit. Except for a hat, which was at that time a favored black baseball type, the Author is wearing the complete Air America Company distinctive gray prison garb.

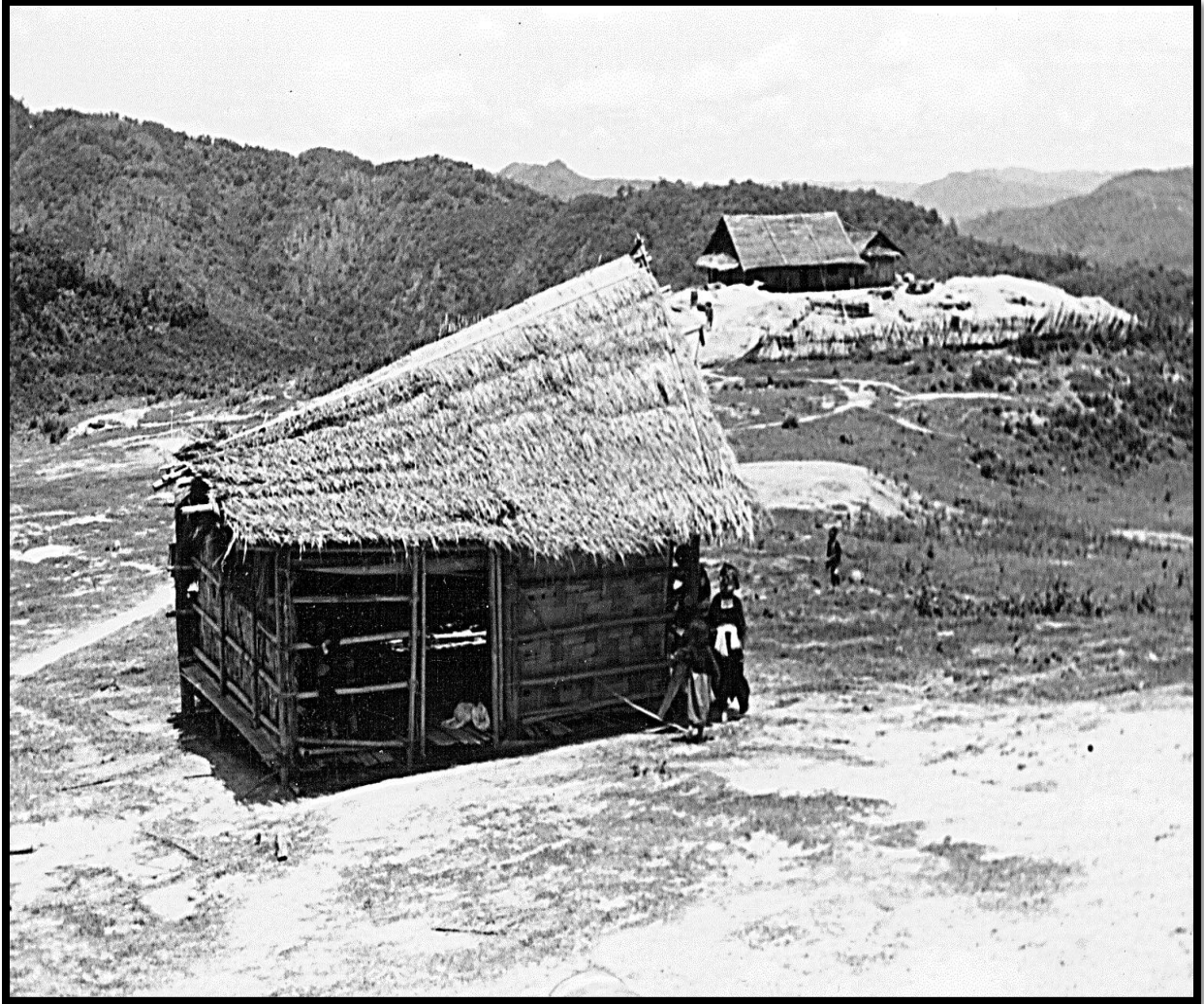
Author Collection.



A Meo village located down slope from the LS-201 strip.
Author Collection.



Upper portion of the Sam Song Hong strip located deep in the hills northeast of the Ban Ban Valley and close to the North Vietnamese border. Curious natives always gathered around our helicopters.
Author Collection.



A rudimentary thatched Meo hut at Lima Site-201.
Author Collection.

When Jarina entered Pearson's cockpit, Billy inquired what he was doing. Mike answered that Scratch wanted him to fly in the ship. Billy P, an extremely proud man insisted, *"I don't need anyone to help me."*

After takeoff Scratch headed east, while climbing higher and higher until topping the clouds at 10,000 feet. Alarmed, Billy yelled, *"What's he doing so high?"*

Pearson was smoking a cigarette at the time. Mike told him that he was using up all his energy. He required all the oxygen he could obtain at that rarified altitude. *"Every time you smoke, you lower your oxygen requirement 1,000 feet. Put that cigarette out!"*

Billy P looked at Mike sourly and extinguished the smoke.

Not all our Bells were required for the exfil. We picked up only four men out of the original eighteen we inserted. Pursued and on the run for days, the starving, disheveled survivors attempted to live off the land, eating and drinking anything available. When they boarded, they carried pieces of wood laden with berries and stalks of wild bananas.

While Scratch returned the team to Pha Khao, we remained working Sites 32 and 50.

Information from the four survivors, and later from incarcerated members of the team, revealed some of what had occurred during the mission. After successfully penetrating the border, carelessness largely proved the team's undoing. On the 26th, Vietnamese patrols discovered a litter strewn camp site, and commenced an area search. Three days later, a piece of abandoned equipment was found. Providing a scent for enemy tracker dogs, two men were soon approached, but managed to fade into the jungle, leaving crew-served equipment essential to the unraveling mission. Losing the mortar proved academic. Over the next twenty-four hours the main Commando Raider unit came under

fire. Expending most of their ammunition during the spirited fight, the group separated into smaller units and dispersed into the surrounding jungle. While attempting to evade west, over the next few days, several team members were killed or captured.

The mission proved an exercise in futility, but some hard lessons were learned by the Customer. Mainly, the team proved much too large, unmanageable, and easy to detect for such an ambitious penetration. Also, more attention to detail was necessary en route to the target, particularly pertaining to the housekeeping realm while in enemy areas.

ROBERTSON OUT THE DOOR

That flight marked the last time that I ever flew with Robertson. Robbie was fired for violating the twelve-hour bottle to throttle drinking rule, something he had been doing for years. Marking a first in our group, we all were very concerned.

Robbie was a conundrum. Not only was he an outstanding pilot, but he could have excelled even more had he not been such a heavy drinker.

From the first time he came to us, we had been able to observe Robbie's curious demeanor in the bar. Sitting on a bar stool, usually at the far-left corner, while elaborating on Vietnam war stories, the former U.S. Army gunship pilot would cut dead skin from his hands with a nail clipper, that had resulted from a fiery Bell crash in Nam. The deeper he delved into his interesting stories, the more glazed his eyes became. I don't recall this, but some indicated he became very obnoxious when drinking. Others could not recall any outright confrontations, but more of an aggressive probing that led some to believe he was challenging them physically. The chief pilot (CPH) indicated Robertson always managed to gravitate to his table.

When beer was first sanctioned or introduced for Long Tieng hostel crews, it was soon abused by some pilots, especially Robbie. (Previous to this, I had carried a can or two in my RON bag.) A few Captains remained awake most of the night drinking and playing cards. Highly fatigued after ten-hours in the cockpit in the vibrating, twitching monster, most of us just wanted to sleep, and were not pleased with the noisy games. After arising one morning, I saw Robbie sitting by himself sucking on a beer. But he managed to fly all that day, probably better than me or any of us who were sober did.

The calming effect of beer was alright given a modicum of discipline. At first, after a long hard day of flying, I attempted drinking one or two beers to unwind before dinner. However, beer tended to unsettle my empty and stress rattled stomach, so I ordered a non-invasive B-complex mail order preparation from the Hudson Vitamin company to help me relax. It seemed to help.

As Robertson's drinking problem accelerated, incidents grew. Headed home one night, after drinking to excess at the Club, he approached the first of three roundabout circles in town. Cut off by a wild driving taxi driver, he purposely smashed into the offending vehicle, something all of us had wanted to do at one time or another, but lacked the resolve because of the consequences. Satisfied, he left the scene of mangled cars and walked home. Udorn was still a small town. Despite the USAF buildup and sycophants flooding in from outlying areas in order to cater to human needs, Robbie was well known by the police for other peccadilloes, and was apprehended at his house. Naturally, such a juicy story quickly made the rounds, causing many to shake their heads in disbelief.

Don Teeters, Systems Chief Pilot based in Taipei, was visiting Udorn. Knight shared a couple of drinks with Don in the

newest watering hole--we called the Couth Bar--that teed off to the right of our original bar. The latest barroom built after the Animal Bar, especially designed to accommodate the ladies, was nicely appointed with booths and tables. As Wayne was leaving for home, Robbie entered from the main bar and sat down next to Teeters.

By the time I arrived and briefly peeked into the room the two men had left the booth, and were standing at the new bar deep in their cups and seemingly friendly, even chummy, conversation. Perhaps my assessment was wrong or the confrontation occurred after I left.

Robbie, scheduled to fly early the following morning, was well beyond the stipulated bottle to throttle limit. Discovering this, Don instructed Robbie to go home. Robertson took exception to the inferred order, and the situation turned ugly, with Robbie aggressively telling Don that he could not fire him for overstepping the drinking regulation. This opinion was not logical, and Robbie should have known better, for Teeters was at the top of Taipei management. However, alcohol ruled supreme and the heated argument continued. With Teeters backed into a corner and pushed to his threshold of tolerance, he went to the radio room and sent a message to headquarters, instructing his people to summarily terminate Robertson--no ifs, ands, or buts.

News of this action surprised and shocked all of us. How could one of our finest Bell pilots be sacked without due process? The issue was referred to the Far East Pilot's Association (FEPA) for review, but Robbie's violation of the drinking rule under current contractual agreements was indefensible. Nothing could reverse the Company's ruling. Despite his excellent aviator credentials, Robbie's actions had sealed his fate. For a long time, he had violated and abused the drinking rule more than anyone else in our group, but Robbie

always skated because management types wisely, or not so wisely, had elected not to challenge him. This time, in choosing Teeters to hassle, he selected the wrong individual. Moreover, part of the union agreement with the Company specified that we would adhere to all safety rules and regulations, and closely police our own cadre of pilots.

Although a member of the upper management elite wielding significant power, Teeters did not emerge from the incident unscathed. The FEPA investigation uncovered that he was also on the schedule to fly with Jim Rhyne at 0900 hours the next morning. As the incident occurred well after 2100 hours, he was also in violation of the golden rule. As a result, Teeters was fined 1,000 dollars. This mere pat on the wrist provided little consolation for our more vocal members--but Robbie was history and we had to continue to march.

The incident revealed certain deficiencies in the union-management agreement. Therefore, with Phil Peyton, JJ McCauley, and Joe Lopes at the helm in Udorn, and with the help of other chapters, the FEPA constitution and by-laws were reviewed, revised, and published in August. One item read:

"...To establish and exercise the rights of collective bargaining for the purpose of making and maintaining employment agreement covering rates of pay, rules and working conditions for the members of FEPA and to settle promptly, disputes and grievances which may arise between such members and their employers [this new clause was inserted too late to save Robbie]. To determine and enter into beneficial agreements, contracts, or make suitable and legal provisions for pension, insurance, annuity, retirement and disability benefits for all members of the association through legislation, collective bargaining and all other proper means. [The last provision was introduced as a "catch all.]"

TIME OFF

"Our leave has been canceled because of the work load and the lack of pilots. More are being hired and recalled from leave. I expect that we may be able to get away by August for 30 days as this is all they will allow. It isn't much time and nothing is firm yet but I will take anything they will allow..."

06/16/70 Letter Home.

"It goes without saying that we are terribly disappointed your leave has been deferred for another month. The more so, as I have my vacation all set from June 29th to July 12th. I was all set to pick you all up this weekend and celebrate the Fourth of July with you at home."

06/22/70 Letter from Home.

Leaving Pete at home with Khun Yai, we embarked on the night train to Bangkok for further medical advice leading to an electroencephalogram (EEG) test. After discussing Rick's problems, and showing Doctor Wells at the Bangkok Christian Hospital paperwork from the Company clinic and USAF hospital, we were referred to a hospital on Rama-4 Road where an EEG test could be administered. It was a disaster. Rick was terrified and thrashed around while the testing was performed. Since the patient was supposed to remain quiet, I wondered about the test's efficacy. Then, after the results were recorded, and the Thai doctor announced that our son showed brain wave patterns in the Occipital region that were consistent with convulsive disorder and a form of epilepsy, I was devastated. During another consultation with Doctor Wells, we were reassured that Rick's condition was not severe, and we should not worry as he would probably outgrow it.

Upon return to Udorn, we found the early rain had flooded much of the city. Some water had accumulated in our front yard, but lacking more rainfall, I expected it to soon dry up. Udorn's road infrastructure was in bad shape and would likely remain so until next year.

When I was finally able to negotiate the roads, I showed an Air Force doctor Rick's skewed EEG test results and explained the situation. He laughed, saying the information was incomplete and indicated that little was conclusive. Blood tests were performed that showed no organic disorder. Urine tested normal. Cranial x-rays were negative.

After learning my plans to take home leave, one doctor recommended that we schedule our son for an appointment at the Neurologic Institute at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in New York City, adding that an EEG would not take long, but a lumbar puncture would require overnight hospitalization.

In addition to the half grain of Phenobarbital administered twice a day, Dilantin was prescribed to contain his seizures.

I could not detect any change in Rick. He was still very active, with no apparent memory or learning problems. Still, we were very apprehensive for, with his past tonsil difficulties, it was preordained that he would have high fevers.

UPCOUNTRY

While we were preparing for the Bangkok trip, on Sunday 7 June, Mike Jarina was scheduled to work at Alternate with Flight Mechanic Demandal in Papa Foxtrot Gulf. During the fifty-four-landing day, Mike serviced many area pads.

Three days later, after an FCF, Mike returned to Site-20A in Papa Foxtrot Hotel with Tod Younglich. They worked outlying areas and RTB Udorn for the night.

As troops from other military regions rotated back to their home bases after their time in the field, Thai infantry units moved forward into the Phou Long Mat and Sam Tong positions. BI 13 and the 13 Regiment was in the process of being assembled in the Site-20 bowl, as Eagle battery was formed to support surrounding defensive positions. Another fire support base (FSB), BI 14, was programmed to move to Phou Long Mat to support movement in that area, and the effort to retake Ban Na.

With adverse weather settling into The Alternate area and reducing Allied air support for a week, Vang Pao's philosophy of sending his pilots to kill the enemy changed. Marking a dramatic sea change in his thinking, probably reinforced by gentle persuasion from his Case Officers, he became more convinced of artillery's advantage as a useful tool that could be employed day or night, and even in foul weather. Moreover, in the interim, when air was unavailable his Raven pilots proved useful as forward air observers spotting, directing, and adjusting big gun fire from the various area batteries. As the monsoon season progressed into heavier stages, artillery fire became more important harassing and interdicting enemy units. In Vientiane AIRA and ARMA personnel, heartened by this development, commented in an intelligence summary:

"By simply firing the artillery, the friendly forces though greater familiarization will hopefully accept the artillery as a valuable tool and will gain confidence in its use and effectiveness; and thus, eventually, will rely on artillery to perform certain types of tasks, particularly providing support when adverse weather precludes air strikes."

Convinced of its efficacy in defensive situations, Vang Pao included artillery support in his future offensive battle orders.

On Saturday morning, after contacting the tower operator, Mike and Bennie Shaffer departed the Udorn airstrip in Papa Foxtrot Hotel. While passing the Mekong, and abeam Wattay Airport, Mike could see monsoonal activity producing low stratus clouds, imbedded thunderstorms, and heavy rain in the distance. Choosing to continue north toward the Ritaville Ridge foothills, he encountered fog banks that precluded flight into the mountains. With too many obstacles to overcome, Mike reversed course and landed at Wattay Airport to wait for improved conditions. After spending several hours at Papa Chu's restaurant waiting, they were recalled to Tango-08.

A TYPICAL DAY

On the 14th I was scheduled to fly Papa Foxtrot Gulf with Shaffer. The Thai B-Bus driver tooted the vehicle's horn early Sunday morning. After loading my RON bag ³ in the rear luggage compartment, we wound our way through the infrastructure mess in town retrieving additional crews. Travel on rapidly deteriorating Tahan Thanon (airport road) required a little longer drive than normal.

At operations, I signed out a survival vest, collected my AK-47 bag containing the assault rifle and five fully loaded twenty-round magazines from my locker and headed for the Bell to conduct a preflight. Bennie, always a conscientious Flight Mechanic, was already there, and indicated that the machine looked good. However, going under the premise that trust was fine to a point, ⁴ I liked to always double check things myself. Sometimes this paid dividends. I normally ate something at home,

³ RON bag: Mostly extra food, a rain slicker, and other items to weather an overnight upcountry should the need arise.

⁴ More aptly, trust, but verify.

but occasionally, delayed by unknown factors, we would repair to the Club dining room to eat or order sandwiches for lunch.

I arrived at Long Tieng early enough to participate in the never-ending Customer and troop-generated supply missions before the weather stymied other air traffic entering the area. I managed to work all day in other than optimum flying conditions, but that was the nature of the job and what I had learned to do well over the years. Unless special weapons were included in the supply assignments, ammunition loads and other supplies were normally standard, so I would ask the Customer for an alternate, or even a third landing zone should I find the primary one clobbered or under fire.

Common to most LTC days, after fueling, I departed south for home plate late in the afternoon, but with sufficient time to clear the mountains before dark. ⁵ During periods of very low ceilings in the flatlands, and Instrument Meteorological Conditions (IMC) at the Udorn airport, I intercepted the "Iron Compass," the railroad tracks leading from Nong Khai to Udorn. Estimating my position and distance from the airport, I called Brigham Control GCI unit on the common 338.3 UHF frequency with this information for the controller to assign me an Identification Friend or Foe (IFF) code for positive control. As Brigham also performed a dual task of Approach Control, generally five miles north, I would be "handed off" to the Udorn tower operator. At this time, I switched to UHF 236.6, stating my position, estimated distance, and requesting an Iron Compass Special VMC approach to Runway 30. ⁶ The narrow gage track took

⁵ Influenced by low ceilings, semi or near complete darkness was relative, often occurring early in the mountains.

⁶ This was a visual approach devised by tower operators and Air America to allow helicopter traffic to depart or arrive when the airfield was below established minimums.

me close to the field where I could perform a right-hand base to the strip's approach portion (the numbers) of the concrete, and immediately air taxi to the parking ramp to avoid delaying incoming fixed wing traffic. Since the Air America ramp was not visible from the tower, this method was preferable and would not require switching to Ground Control, which would require landing and delay to dial in the correct frequency and establish contact.

Once in the chocks, I split the needles (shut down), and during the rotor blade coast down, called the Company radio operator on VHF frequency 119.1 announcing "PFH on the deck, request transportation." Leaving the Flight Mechanic to post flight the aircraft, I boarded the B-Bus for Operations. Then, after returning all checked out equipment, I completed the logbook with the daily time and any actual or perceived maintenance squawks, and checked the following day's schedule. As per our agreement with local management, I stowed and locked my weapon in the assigned locker. The crew area also provided hot showers that were appreciated after a RON, and fresh clothing was available from the locker. Normally fatigued after daily LTCs, I was anxious to go home, eat whatever food was left over, and retire. This routine became old--fast.

A BONA FIDE HERO

Mike Jarina, flying Papa Foxtrot Juliet with Bobby Barrow, was again delayed at Wattay Airport before arriving at Padong, where he shuttled troops and supplies across the valley to Khang Kho until time to RTB.

Mike and Barrow encountered even worse early weather conditions on Monday. Flying Juliet again, including ferry time,

they managed only ten landings and less than five hours, some in the Site-72 area.

Tod Yourglich replaced Ben Shaffer on Papa Foxtrot Gulf. Circumnavigation allowed me to arrive at Long Tieng. After one or two supply runs, Vang Pao and his bodyguards were waiting on the ramp to board my ship. I took the group to view a new position on Phu Long Mat.⁷ The responsibility to secure and hold this particular frontline sector was delegated to an under-strength Nam Yu battalion composed of Lieu, Yao, and Lao Theung ethnic tribesmen, living in northwestern Military Region One and delivered to Long Tieng by C-123 crews in May.

A deep trench, a work still in progress, located on the forward rim of the hill formed a defensive fighting position and protected rear defenses in depth. In front of and below the trench a sheer drop to the valley floor enhanced the defensive attributes of the site. It appeared formidable, but knowing the enemy proclivity to attack and overrun even seemingly impregnable sites like the one at Site-85, no position was inviolable.

Since there was no helipad available in the immediate narrow trench area, we landed a short distance south. From our vantage point, a little guy wearing the distinctive red beret of an officer, was seen scurrying about the trench encouraging his men and continuing preparations for all contingencies.

Satisfied with his inspection, Vang Pao and his people re-boarded my ship for Long Tieng.

I finished the day and RTB just prior to dark.

⁷This term was mostly generic for the entire Phu Long Mat region. It included an area that encompassed several miles of territory, comprised of very high mountains, hills, ravines, and river valleys.

During the night, under the cover of low ceilings and visibility, aided by the lack of flare and gunship support, the enemy managed to creep up the side of the mountain, attack, and enter the forward trench line. A vigorous hand-to hand fight ensued during which the courageous red beret officer and many of the defenders were killed. Because the officer was found with several dead enemy surrounding him, he was proclaimed a hero.

Shaken by the loss of their esteemed leader, some members of the mixed battalion began to withdraw from the field over the next two days, leaving only a little over a hundred troops to defend the mountain. The deserters were summarily stripped of their weapons and returned to Nam Yu.

Since sufficient and more reliable Thai forces had not yet arrived to man the forward defensive positions, Tony Poe's Nam Yu troops were replaced by SGU soldiers from Savannakhet. However, after serving in the field for a couple of months, they lobbied to return home and soon abandoned their positions, probably bolstering enemy morale. Unreliable troops like these were a continuing problem for us. They were reluctant to patrol the immediate area, so consequently, any radio contact with the site was suspect regarding the current situation. Since it was known that enemy forward observers monitored our radio frequencies, I devised a plan hoping to confuse the enemy, whereby I would make contact with the radio operator of my intended landing zone to obtain information. Then I would say I was going to another pad, but land at the original spot. This seemed to work for me...most of the time.

A BAD DECISION

Helicopter accidents involving mostly new pilots continued to plague the H-34 program. Hired in November, Captain Robert Bailey, flying in Hotel-66 with Flight Mechanic RC Mariano, was

assigned to take ten troops from Nam Yu (LS-118A) to QC3092, a high pad six miles northeast of Ban Vieng (LS-135) in Houa Khong Province. Bob landed, but the soldiers refused to disembark. Not keen on ejecting heavily armed types, and recalling the stories of those who were shot at trying to do so, the crew elected to return the passengers to Site-118A. The decision proved unwise. The power available for the density altitude was insufficient for transition to flight. During takeoff from the pinnacle, Bailey lost turns. Despite the PIC's efforts to recover RPM and gain speed, there was not sufficient altitude, and Hotel-66 crashed into a ravine. The aircraft rolled violently to the right, with two passengers killed and the rest injured.

Determined pilot error, Bailey was terminated, but timely action by FEPA allowed him to resign without prejudice.

LTC

En route weather from Udorn to Site-20A improved on the 17th. Flying Papa Foxtrot Gulf, Jarina and Terry Dunn arrived at Long Tieng via Wattay Airport. Since Cher Pao Moua's men were advancing west from Bouam Long to seize previously lost territory, Mike was sent there via Site-16 (Agony) to assist the offensive. During the forty-landing day, he worked Site-32, northwest at Phu Cum, and the westerly Phou Vieng (LS-06) areas. With these sites reinforced, troops moved on and recaptured the commanding heights of Phou Then, which the enemy had previously used to shell Bouam Long.

Because of a management requirement to maintain H-34 and Bell pilots under a hundred hours a month (preferably seventy hours), senior pilot, big John Fonburg, opted to transfer from the H-34 into the turbine engine program. There was no downgrade when transitioning to the Bell, and an H-34 Captain retained his status. After ground school with Drex Morgan and an initial

transition flight with Phil Goddard, John was assigned to me for upcountry Bell flight training.

For the first time in the history of the two helicopter programs, Air America was in the process of establishing a formal instructor pilot (IP) status for selected senior pilots, which included a specific pay schedule. This innovation was a significant transformation from the days of teaching the upcountry ropes to newly arrived pilots without additional compensation. This duty included all the risks involved in allowing many unschooled pilots to perform mountain landings. Except for some minor service-acquired high-altitude experience, this was generally the method by which we were all subjected to learn, earn our bones, and become proficient in the mountains. Without standardization, the method did not always work and sometimes resulted in accidents.

As the new concept advanced and coalesced into a viable program, I was considered an IP candidate in the seniority pecking order. Unlike our former U.S. Army pilots, I had never undergone any formal IP training in the Corps, but had been around helicopters and pilots long enough to have a good feel for the men and machines. In addition, there were positive factors involved that I did not even consider. Scratch, always at the top of anyone's list, most likely forwarded my name for consideration. I had flown with Kanach several times in the past and he had commented on my attention to detail in the cockpit, especially closely monitoring and maintaining constant RPM settings. Over the years, I also acquired a reputation as a conservative, conscientious pilot. Moreover, after initial transition problems, I had experienced and survived many unschooled challenging emergencies and become very proficient in the machine. Unlike other pilots, I never crashed or lost a Bell.

When initially asked if I would accept the job, having mixed feeling regarding a formal IP billet, I was conflicted. For years, I had enough problems just taking care of myself. Noting the adage, "What goes around, comes around," I considered it unwise to officially criticize another pilot's actions, for passing judgment on another, especially a peer, always returned to haunt you. Sometimes this was difficult, but if I accepted the job, I would be obliged to evaluate and help other pilots achieve official standards. It would be quite a change and I wondered if I would be up to the task. The job would also entail the unenviable duty of conducting Bell FCF test flights, something that could require many hours of difficult work.

Big John was an original member of the "sheep dipped" Marine group "temporaries" introduced to Udorn in March 1961 to influence the Lao war balance of power. John remained throughout most of the year, working with White Star Special Forces personnel at Luang Prabang, and then returned to the Marine Corps. In mid-1965 he returned to Air America.

Fonburg was a character whose antics in the Corps and Air America fostered numerous colorful stories and marked him for many playful digs in the Club bar. Remaining taciturn, he never defended himself or took exception to any joshing. Perhaps enjoying the negative notoriety, he simply downed his favorite drink.

In past years I had flown a few flights in the H-34 with John and found his reputation, proficiency, and ability to carry large loads true, and extraordinary. For this, he was favored by Tony Poe to work at Nam Yu, until Tony could no longer tolerate the excessive amount of food and beer John consumed. Yes, John could be equated as a glutton when it came to consuming food and drink. For this reason, he was grossly overweight, and I wondered how this would equate to his training in the Bell, an

aircraft that lacked the same in payload, stability, or was as forgiving as the H-34 was in most working configurations.

I looked forward to working with John. I had heard many of the Fonburg stories from those who knew him in the Corps, but I had only met him when he returned to Udorn in 1965. Discovering his considerable interest in the securities and commodities market, he and I had long discussions regarding both. In addition, he subscribed to the James Dines investment letter that was tailored to an expected increase in gold prices. Gold and silver were much in the news at the time and many of us were excited over the prospects of becoming wealthy after investing in the metals. ⁸

Crewing Papa Foxtrot Hotel, John, Terry Dunn, and I joined Jarina and other helicopter crews in the hour-plus trek to Long Tieng. Since I was not yet a bona fide IP, and John was new in the machine, I initially opted to retain the right cockpit seat to better demonstrate starting procedures and talk to the air operations loader. I also felt more confident and comfortable in the right seat-something I would have to sacrifice if selected as an IP. We worked locally until time to RTB.

On Thursday, while I was assigned to standby at the airfield, Jarina and Younglich crewed Papa Foxtrot Gulf upcountry. They worked the Long Tieng and Site-72 areas for several hours conducting thirty-seven landings. On one run, Chuck Campbell told Mike to take a load of ammunition and grenades to a high point on Phu Long Mat. While circling, Jarina failed to see anyone in the pad's vicinity. However, the signal was prominently displayed, so he landed and Tod discharged the load. Returning to The Alternate for another load, he observed

⁸ James Dines was eventually proven correct, but only years later when our interest in gold had waned.

what looked like a string of ants walking across the upper Tha Tam Bleung Valley headed toward Sam Tong.

Chuck asked Mike if he managed to deliver the load to the proper landing zone. Mike nodded in the affirmative, but added that the position and area were devoid of people. Campbell proclaimed that was impossible. There had to be someone there; for troops had been shuttled into the position the previous day. Then when Mike related seeing men were walking out, Chuck told him to take them back. Mike countered, *"Do you really believe they are going back?"*

Despite reservations, Mike elected to try. By the time he refueled and returned to the area, the troops were halfway up the hill leading to Sam Tong. He landed on a pad and inquired the interrogative *"bai nai?"* to a troop. Suspecting something, the man just looked at him blankly. Then, after Mike told him to get onboard, he refused. When others similarly learned where they were going, no one would board his aircraft.

Not long after this encounter a maintenance problem was detected, necessitating leaving PFG, but not the crew at The Alternate overnight. This was known in the trade as Aircraft Grounded for Parts (AGP). Mike and Tod deadheaded home on Papa Foxtrot Hotel.

The next morning, I departed Udorn as a deadhead in 12F, along with parts and mechanics to repair Papa Foxtrot Gulf, after which I was scheduled to test and fly the machine. In the interim, I was assigned to double crew 13F with Don Leach and Flight Mechanic Casio for a Special Mission south of Pha Hang (LS-205) and south of Phou Pha Meu in upper Houa Phan Province. General Vang Pao and his Case Officers were still monitoring enemy trails leading toward the Ban Ban Valley and the Plain of Jars. Consequently, the landing zone was located relatively close to Sam Neua Town, and west of Route-6, to provide good

movement into and out of the target area, but with relatively few friendly villagers present still able to provide information and sustenance.

Senior Captain Charlie Weitz, along with Jarina and Terry Dunn in Papa Foxtrot Hotel, was designated mission leader. Mid-morning, we flew our respective ships to Phu Cum to top off the fuel tanks, conduct a final briefing, and await our escort planes. After a successful mission, we returned to The Alternate. I exited 13F to check on the progress to repair Golf. Requiring additional parts, the machine remained AGP for another night, so I deadheaded home with Leach.

SAR

The twentieth of June began as a relatively innocuous day, but morphed into one that was indelibly and forever burned into my memory. ⁹ Departing Udorn in Papa Foxtrot Hotel with John Fonburg and Len Bevan, the flight marked my first as an official Bell instructor pilot (IP) for pay purposes. John had advanced sufficiently in his transition process that I allowed him to sit in the right seat. Ferry time would not count toward IP pay, but I would not have to log deadhead time.

After arriving at Long Tieng, we began working the same forward defensive positions around Sam Tong and Site-72 areas. Early that afternoon, during a fuel stop, the Customer directed us to participate in a SAR just off the southeast Plain of Jars. Because of the critical nature of any SAR, and Fonburg's inexperience in the Bell, I chose to return to the right seat, placing me in a better position to conduct a projected recovery attempt. The briefing was just that, for not much was known at the Alternate about the circumstances regarding the SAR, other

⁹ There were many such incidents over my twelve-year period there.

than our H-34 pilots were at the scene working with the Raven pilots. After checking the coordinates on my map, I was a little perplexed, for the man had landed right in the middle of a stirred up and angry nest of hornets.

A number of twin engine OV-10 Bronco aircraft, call sign Nail-42, had been relocated to Nakhon Phanom earlier in the year to conduct trail reconnaissance and direct strikes in southern Laos. The plane, one that reminded me of the legendary double hulled P-38 Lightning of World War Two, provided not only forward air control (FAC) capability, but, equipped with machine guns and ordinance rails for rockets and bombs, was a formidable weapon. When the war in Military Region Two heated up in 1970, the plane and pilots were employed to supplement the six or seven O-1E Raven pilots based at Long Tieng. We worked closely with these low flying Ravens, but high attrition and the adverse effects of combat in Military Region Two exacted a dreadful toll on their numbers, necessitating a steady flow of new pilots.

Late Monday morning while trolling in cloudy skies over the PDJ, Nail-42 and another plane accidentally locked horns. With his OV-10 too badly damaged to continue flight, the Nail pilot punched out. He landed in relatively good shape, but unfortunately within a concentration of Vietnamese troops seventeen miles northeast of Site-20A, on the fringe of the southern PDJ.

Chuck Engle, only in-country a month or so, was assigned to work out of Long Tieng for General Vang Pao as Raven-26 flying the O1E Bird Dog. Chuck was en route to Long Tieng from Wattay Airport when he overheard King talking about a downed airman.

After receiving word of a downed plane, Craig Duehring departed in a Bird Dog for TG9738 with another new Raven FAC onboard. Engle, flying a second O1E, followed. Duehring was an eyewitness to the entire SAR:

"...made contact with the downed pilot before my UHF radio receiver died. By this time, Ray DeArrigunaga (Raven-21) had spotted the parachute and vectored both Chuck and me towards the crash site. Chuck made radio contact with Nail-42 on guard channel and he and Ray took over the SAR while Park [Raven-23] and I listened in on our hand-held survival radios. Chuck dropped down under some low clouds to about 25 feet over the PDJ while Ray coordinated the arrival of [two] sets of A-1s. Both Chuck and the Nail [pilot] heard the sound of AK-47 fire as Chuck flew low around the area searching for the survivor. Chuck finally located the Nail [pilot] hiding in a clump of bushes. Then he flew over the PDJ to a clear area so that he could lead the fighters to the target area. The A-1s saturated the area with ordnance all the while taking heavy ground fire. The first set of fighters withdrew and the second set dropped under the clouds just as Chuck began taking much heavier ground fire from another clump of trees only 25 meters north of the Nail [pilot]. He marked the target [with white phosphorous rockets] and circled back over the downed pilot and cleared the fighters in hot. ¹⁰ The A-1 pilots strafed and rocketed the enemy position, after which the downed pilot indicated that the action was very close to him. He also stated that heavy fire was being directed at the fighter planes.

When the second set of fighters silenced the machine gun, Chuck cleared an Air America H-34 [pilot] in to attempt a pickup. The helicopter took numerous hits from fresh enemy positions that suddenly opened up south and west of the survivor. The helicopter was badly damaged and [the pilot] forced to head for Long Tieng. A second Air America UH-1 helicopter [the Author] attempted a pickup."

¹⁰ Cleared in hot: Weapons systems armed for launch and attack.

With John flying from the left seat, we launched toward the 5,400-foot commanding heights of Phou Seu, located on the southern edge of the Plain of Jars. En route we passed the H-34 pilot, who indicated his ship had received substantial battle damage. He also briefed us over the Fox Mike radio with the little info he had learned regarding the situation. The area was still hot and the pilot was close to his parachute.

Unlike a smaller, sleeker Bell profile, the H-34 was a large target. I hoped this difference would work in our favor, allowing us to sneak into the site, quickly perform the pickup, and depart before any enemy gunners could boresight our ship. I continued to let John fly in order to observe his performance during what was certain to be a stressful situation. With my attention not directed to flying, I would also be in a far better position to scout the area for the pilot and enemy.

While still a few miles out, I could see the target area on the only open area, a grassy, bushy knoll on a finger ridge protruding below the south side of Phou Seu. A compact tree line existed on the right edge that almost extended the entire length of the hill. Except for Phu Seu, the remainder of the area within 270 degrees of our approach path was inundated with heavily wooded foothills and ravines that easily concealed any Vietnamese or their movement. There would be one way into and one way out of the narrow strip of land.

A Raven pilot directing the action indicated the area, just after being prepped was quiet. The downed pilot was in the upper right tree line, and we were immediately cleared straight in for the rescue attempt. The information provided me with some confidence that this SAR might not create undue problems. I knew better. There were too many unknowns, and Murphy was always lurking nearby. Moreover, none of these hurry-up missions were particularly easy. Enemy traps to suck a helicopter into a

killing zone were conducted from the beginning of our SAR experience in 1964. It was expected. Therefore, I was more cautious since the advent of my growing family and was more reluctant to go charging into a perilous situation without assessing the odds. Urging John on with instructions, I also briefed Bevan to maintain a sharp eye for any enemy presence and to stay close to his weapon.

While on short final to a hover, the camouflage chute on the edge of the tree line began billowing up above the trees. This was an unexpected hazard that could easily spoil our day if not handled correctly. Not far from the parachute, the pilot ran out to show himself and then quickly dashed back into the trees. With the chute rendering a landing close to the tree line overly dangerous, the only logical answer would be to land toward the center of the ridge. Not the best of all worlds, for now the pilot would have to run to our ship, and we would be far more exposed to enemy fire from the left side.

We did not get a chance to test this theory, for just before touchdown small arms fire broke out from the west and we began taking hits. Apparently, nothing critical had been damaged that anyone could determine, and since we were still able to fly, I told John to reverse course and depart. Perhaps new in the machine, or completely focused on the task at hand, or simply terrified, Fonburg did not react as quickly as I expected. Finally, after what seemed hours to me, he turned around, cleared the ridge, and began a climb out south toward Long Tieng.

Aware that our flight path was restricted to a narrow channel, the enemy was waiting for us. Loud automatic gunfire greeted us during the ascent. Although concealed in the forests, it seemed the bad guys were all over the area. Then a H-34 pilot covering us indicated that he observed copious fuel steaming

from our belly. Not knowing exactly what other damage had been done, I planned to proceed toward Long Tieng, if necessary, using the nearest semi-friendly Site-72 for an alternate forced landing spot.

I considered the most recent incident sufficient training for a person who had little emergency procedure expertise in the Bell. After formulating a plan to RTB, I grasped the flight controls, informing John, *"I have the aircraft."* He failed to respond. Staring straight ahead, he failed to utter a word or relinquish his ham hock death-grip on the controls. Obviously traumatized, he seemed frozen in time and space, unaware that I was even in the cockpit talking to him. I could not let him continue. Two men on the controls was not conducive to a safe and effective solution to our problems. I attempted to shake the controls and again told him to release his grip. No response. Nothing. Nothing. I had let John go too far and had never encountered a problem like this before. Since I had no idea what he was thinking, I considered a drastic shock action, perhaps smacking him in the mouth, but that would have wasted precious seconds while un-strapping and leaning across the center pedestal. And there was no guarantee the maneuver would work or not cause additional problems.

Taking the least innocuous action, I keyed the transmitter switch again and screamed, *"John, get the fuck off the controls! I'm the PIC and when I say to do something, do it!"* This tirade seemed get his attention and produced the desired effect. He exited his seemingly uncommunicative state or whatever world he was in at the time, and I had command of Hotel. However, when I looked down at the cyclic, I realized that while excitedly chewing Fonburg out, I had inadvertently double clicked the transmitter switch, allowing my epithets to be heard by all in the vicinity. How embarrassing was that? But at the time there

were more pressing issues to address--flying a wounded bird with an unknown airworthiness status over an area with no apparent openings in the trees to achieve a safe forced landing.

Chuck Engle and other Raven pilots were monitoring our unsuccessful SAR attempt:

"[The helicopter pilot] attempted a pick up and got as far as a hover over the Nail. [After departing] yet another gun began firing and the helicopter took a serious hit to the fuel tank. Chuck spotted the gun and flew his aircraft between it and the badly damaged UH-1 [I was unaware of this], surprising the enemy but taking a hit of his own from an AK-47, the bullet entered the left wing root, clipped the fuel line that ran above his head before it flew completely through the cockpit and out the roof. Immediately, fuel spewed down the outside of the fuselage as well as down the inside of the cockpit itself, drenching his clothes on the left side. The break was upstream of the fuel selector so it could not be turned off.

Knowing that the radios in the Bird Dog are bolted to the floor under the back seat, he wisely shut off the FM and VHF radios but retained the UHF radio until the end of the mission. He also only fired marking rockets from the right wing as sparks under the left wing could easily have ignited the fuel spray. He marked the new target and cleared the waiting fighters on a strafing run. Only at this point, when the Nail was safe, did he finally say he needed to head home while Ray continued to direct the SAR. Park and I fell in behind Chuck and I told him to simply shut down the last radio as I would clear the way for him."

We continued toward The Alternate in complete silence. After passing the lower Tha Tam Bleung Valley, with no further indication of a problem, and away from the hot area, I began to breathe a bit easier. Then, when we reached Long Tieng's east

gap, I knew we had it made. Instead of flying to the main ramp with fuel pouring from the tank, I elected to land on a remote portion of the southeast sling load ramp. Bevan checked the battle damage, the worse consisting of holes in a fuel boost pump and tank. We left the ship there, pending laborious repairs, and deadheaded to Udorn on 12F.

Although a little concerned, but realizing anyone could have reacted like John in an equally stressful situation, I never discussed the issue with him or anyone else. The simple fact was, SARs were usually lousy operations for a pilot, and exacted a lot from a person. Fonburg had been with the Company a long time, probably encountered similar incidents, and would do fine in the future.

Despite our successful recovery at Long Tieng, the SAR drama was not complete. Duehring continued:

"As we cleared the very last ridge (Skyline Ridge), [Engle's] engine died of fuel starvation but he spiraled down and landed perfectly, rolling to a halt on the runway. While waiting for the runway to clear, I watched him run out of his dead airplane and jump into the last remaining spare aircraft. In minutes he was airborne and returned to the SAR. After swapping radios, we followed suit. When I saw him again, he was back under the clouds at 25 feet pointing out troop formations as well as another .50 caliber machine gun that had been set up on a hill to the south during his absence.

By this time, the Jolly Greens and Sandy forces had arrived on station and the SAR was handed over to them. Soon Nail-42 was safely on his way back to Thailand."

Engle, who was later killed performing his duties, was posthumously awarded the Air Force Cross for his good work that day.

We were grounded for lack of an aircraft.

Mike Jarina and Terry Dunn went upcountry in Papa Foxtrot Juliet the same day. Working Ban Son in the morning, they were sent to Bouam Long in the afternoon, and were not available for the SAR. After conducting forty-five landings, the crew headed for the house.

Short on pilots, there was no time off in which to have a few beers, forget the hairy episodes, and eradicate the demons of war. On Sunday I was scheduled to fly out of Long Tieng with Andy Anderson in Papa Foxtrot Gulf. Except for the numerous landings on forward positions, there were no further incidents. Papa Foxtrot Hotel still sat on the ramp where I had plunked it, while mechanics busily changed a fuel tank cell. This was necessarily time consuming and involved removal of cargo compartment deck plates secured by many bolts. Since the fuel boost pump was installed in a belly recess, it proved an easy fix. We did not want to leave the ship at Alternate another night, so the men struggled to complete the job, after which a pilot ferried the ship to Udorn for detailed battle damage inspection.

Monday morning, Fonburg, Casio, and I were back in the saddle of Papa Foxtrot Juliet for another day of work at Long Tieng. John was a relatively taciturn person, and if he harbored any ill will toward me for my previous outburst, he never showed or admitted it. For this reason, I believed he understood my intentions that day.

KNIGHT'S BUSY MONTH

Wayne conducted many Bell FCFs in June. His local training duties began on the 15th with Dick Theriault (second DOH 06/03/70) in Hotel-54. With a need for pilots, Dick was a rehire who for, personal reasons had left the Company in 1969. Rehiring was a fairly common choice for those who wanted a break from the

tedious flying in Laos, or those restless types who attempted a new vocation that never achieved expectations. Naturally, if the pilot did not "burn his bridges," and the CPH approved the rehire, the Company was only too happy to reacquire seasoned H-34 pilots with Laos experience. Paperwork was already on file and there was a minimum of flight training required-usually just a warm-up. The only thing that changed was the man's seniority number. Apparently, the liberal leave policy was not sufficient and some pilots treated Air America like a revolving door, coming and going several times.

On the twentieth, Wayne provided Dick a second in command (SIC) proficiency check in Hotel-69. Jerry McEntee and other recently designated H-34 IPs conducted upcountry H-34 training. Wayne performed some of the Bell route checks.

Pipe smoking Beng Bengston (second DOH 06/04/70) was back. Beng, a former Marine and older type about Jarina's age, who was originally hired in July 1966, had left Air America in 1969 because of a medical issue with either diverticulitis, or a severe case of amoebiasis.

Mike Jarina knew Bengston very well and they conducted many conversations. Beng, Verne Clarkson, Mike, and their families all lived in the same Bangkok neighborhood. Therefore, they attempted to obtain the same time off schedule to drive to Bangkok together in their small Japanese pickup trucks.

Mike and Beng had flown together many times, including the Burke-Emery SAR, and Mike called him "Shaky" from a nervous condition he had that was not related to any overt disease, but one that manifested in his hands when he became excited or was lighting his pipe. Beng knew he had a problem and Mike used to kid him saying, *"Do you get in sync with the shaking helicopters?"* Beng would laugh. Interestingly, when Beng took the controls of a helicopter all his nervous symptoms ceased.

Mike had purchased a tape recorder from the Air Force post exchange and there was something wrong with it. Happy when he worked on electronic equipment, Beng indicated that he would repair it. Since his hand was shaking, Mike wondered how he would manage to properly manipulate a screwdriver. Beng's tremors ceased and he fixed the recorder.

Beng had been a briefing officer in Vietnam and was a humorous person, especially while talking about the USMC. He was also something of a prankster who created a sign that he displayed at the Air America facility: Disneyland East. One day, an executive from the Washington office arrived and saw the sign.

Wayne and Beng had a SIC session on the 22nd in Hotel-57.

Ed Rudolfs (DOH 10/13/65) had begun transition training in the Bell. After the Bengston flight, Wayne and Ed crewed 96W to Long Tieng to conduct upcountry training.

That same day assistant chief pilot (ACP) Jerry McEntee, First Officer Serm Swangpant, and Flight Mechanic AJ Alor encountered engine problems with Hotel-15 on the flatlands fourteen miles north of Vientiane. Following a successful forced landing, the helicopter was left in the field pending engine removal and change. The crew was retrieved and flown to Tango-08.

Tuesday morning, Knight and Fonburg left Udorn for Long Tieng in Papa Foxtrot Juliet. Wayne was interested in John's transition progress and the current area situation.

The next morning Wayne flew 13F to Wattay Airport to shuttle a maintenance crew and a prepositioned quick engine change (QEC) to the Hotel-15 site.

After returning to Udorn, he provided Dan Carson (DOH 09/13/66) a proficiency check in Hotel-59.

I thought I was finished flying for the month, but during the late morning on the twenty fifth, a B-Bus driver arrived at the house with a note from Operations to report to the airfield for a flight. I normally kept a bag ready, so the wait was not long.

Apparently, Papa Foxtrot Hotel was out of the barn early from a maintenance inspection and released to fly after an FCF. I launched and the more than five hours flown that afternoon pushed me over ninety hours. So much for the attempt to keep us to seventy hours per month.

MR-4

After capturing Saravane with relative ease, and a government counterattack failing, the enemy moved north to the SGU headquarters and road watch launching site at Ban Khok Mai (LS-171). Despite the RLAF T-28 pilots' sortie efforts, to include a ten aircraft overfly of Lima-44 on 12 June, in a show-the-flag gesture, the site fell on 16 June.

The automated TACAN site (Channel-72 that first became operational during June 1966) on top of Phou Kate was the next enemy goal. Two days after the loss of Site-171, a few enemy shock troops, performing what was considered impossible, evading mines and barbed wire, scaled the high mountain and dislodged ADC troops protecting the unmanned TACAN unit.

When the navigational device went off the air, USAF personnel based out of Udorn went to the mountain in a Porter to recon and evaluate the situation. If a landing was deemed necessary to fix the problem, a helicopter was designated the primary support vehicle. During one of the overflies, enemy troops commenced firing their AK-47s at the plane. Taking the hint, the PIC returned to Pakse, where considerable battle damage was recorded. Since it was positively determined that the

site was unfriendly, the determination was made to destroy the TACAN. Attesting to pilot proficiency at the time, it took three sorties to complete the job. ¹¹

Government SGU troops recaptured the site in July. However, the USAF had learned its lesson, so after searching for more security, an automated TACAN was later positioned to the south on a high mountain north of Wat Phu in Champassak Province.

The Military Region Four region had skated for many years with tacit agreements of nonaggression between FAR commanders and the communists. Therefore, the recent warfare was relatively unknown to the region and the RLA was ill prepared to defend a site, much less go on the offensive. Moreover, the bottom line revealed that General Phasouk lacked sufficient troops to attempt another offensive to retake Saravane.

By the 22nd, the large SGU PS-39 site, located in the hills northeast of Saravane and twelve miles north of Ban Nong Boua, was lost. The next day Site-134 fell, leaving the valley and road open to vehicle and troop transit east. Following these losses, most of northern Military Region Four was down the tubes and new enemy LOCs open.

Moving toward the Mekong, the Vietnamese were in the process of a build-up on both sides of Khong Island in the southern most portion of Military Region Four. Khong Island was home to the only Tom Dooley hospital in southern Laos. It was staffed with airline stewardesses, as at the Ban Houei Sai facility. I had journeyed there years before, where I accidentally, but perversely delighted in blowing up the skirt of a tall, good looking American girl with the H-34 downwash.

¹¹ Warren, a member of the 74th Communications Group (Udon 69-71, Plans/Programs/Communications/Engineering).
(wysiwyg://126/http://members.tripod.com/chancefac/TACANs.htm)

In July the island was threatened. As Agency intelligence indicated:

"For the past week, enemy forces have been unusually active around Khong Island near the Cambodian border. North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao troops followed up their earlier raids along the west bank of the Mekong River with a battalion-sized attack on government positions to the east of the island on 18 July. The attack was repulsed, but the communists will probably keep trying to seize control of this area because of its position in the transportation corridor to the south. The government has flown in reinforcements for the Khong Island garrison. It is doubtful, however, that they will be enough if the communists choose to employ the four-battalion force they are believed to maintain in the immediate area." ¹²

¹²Segment Sources:

EW Knight Emails, 09/09/00, 10/29/00, 10/30/00, 11/01/00.

Mike Jarina Interviews.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 244, 262-263.

Bill Leary June 1970 Notes.

Joe Leeker, Hotel-66.

Robbins, *Air America*, 244-246, 276.

Air Commando Journal, Craig Duehring, *Raven-26, The Story of Chuck Engle*, 31-32, an Account of the Raven Participation for Downed Nail-42 Pilot on 06/20/70-Forwarded by Email to the Author by Al Cates 08/30/13.

Flight Crew Designators, 02/01/69.

John Pratt, *CHECO-RLAF 1954-1970*, 119.

Harry Blout, 12-13.

CIA Bulletin, 07/21/70.

The crew of Fonburg, Meyers, and myself continued our Long Tieng commutes on Wednesday the first in Papa Foxtrot Hotel, one of six Bells still in our inventory. ¹ As John was still a training Captain, I drew instrument pilot pay that did not include ferry time. Monsoon rains at both Udorn and upcountry prevented a full day of flying.

Pat Colgan joined me on Thursday in the same Bell. We flew almost ten and a half hours out of The Alternate before recovering at the Udorn base.

The next day Fonburg, Anderson, and I returned to Long Tieng in Fox Hotel. Part of the day was spent working out of Moug Nham (LS-63) in a large valley surrounded by mountains about twelve miles east of Tha Thom. New defensive pads were being developed that required a pilot's attention as to proper size and obstacles. There was a new elevated landing zone located in the northeast corner of the valley on a narrow ridge. Lacking a wind sock, smoke, or other indications, winds were always unpredictable and difficult to judge. I flew the first trip to assess the pad. Unsure about wind direction and velocity, after a flyby, I chose to use the prevailing valley winds for an approach from the northeast. It proved a wrong decision, for the apparent groundspeed was too great and forced me to wave off. In the process, I was caught in a slight downdraft. Low and slow, I applied additional power and momentarily exceeded the proscribed torque for the altitude. This was exceedingly embarrassing, as I was attempting to show

¹At this time there were twenty-four UH-34D helicopters based in Udorn.

Big John how to maneuver the Bell on these new pads too small to accommodate an H-34. As I maintained many times before, one could never be complacent from day to day, for you never stopped learning the vagaries of mountain flying. There were those who learned this axiom the hard way and survived, and there were those who did not.

In addition to forty landings, I logged ten hours that day, my last until late August.

Jarina and Ben Shaffer followed us to Long Tieng in PFG. They remained in The Alternate area conducting forty-eight landings.

On Saturday the fourth, Jarina and Anderson, accompanied by Flight Mechanics Dunn and Casio, proceeded north with Papa Foxtrot Hotel into the mountains. Hampered somewhat by weather, Mike managed to conduct fifty-six landings in the Long Tieng area.

Following a day off the schedule, Mike and Tod Yourglich returned to The Alternate. Covering more ground than normal, they were assigned to work north servicing the numerous positions at Bouam Long, Phu Cum, and Phou Vieng. As Vang Pao was interested in maintaining his western flank, they worked at Phou Fa (LS-16 also called Agony) and Phou Fa Noi, four miles southwest. The battalion from this area and Phou So was being groomed for a wet season offensive soon to commence at Ban Na. Interest was also building as to enemy activity in and around Moung Soui, and if there was a possibility of regaining that site.

With the rainy season providing a temporary respite from major hostilities, much of the work included alerting village leaders of Vang Pao's pressing need for more men and boys to replace those lost in combat and other attrition. With conscription in vogue and pickings slim, new recruits would be

flown to Moung Cha (LS-113) for muster in preparation for large unit training at Xieng Lom, Pits Camp, and other locations in Thailand.

On Tuesday, Mike and Tod returned to many of the same sites visited the previous day. Coverage included Ban Nam Thao (LS-161) in the Long Pot area on the west side of the Nam Ngum, where several old Meo sites were located in the foothills.

Wayne Knight, preparing for September school matriculation in San Jose, California, in order to complete his education and obtain a business administration degree, was relatively inactive in July. ² Instead, Knight spent two weeks in Taipei meeting with Don Teeters and other management types recommending who should replace him and discussing other important items that might arise until his two-year educational sabbatical was complete. It was agreed that Phil Goddard, current ACP Bells, would assume the CPH slot. Additionally, because of the Company change in policy regarding designated instructor pilots, a Senior Instructor Pilot (SIP) for the Bell program was needed.

Against this end, Wayne flew a local training and proficiency check in Papa Foxtrot Gulf with Dick Lister on the ninth, who was being evaluated and groomed to be elevated to SIP status in the Bell program.

While Knight and Lister were having fun on Thursday, after some weather delay, Jarina and Ortillo picked their way around clouds in Papa Foxtrot Hotel to Long Tieng. The abbreviated day around Site-272 and Sam Tong netted less than five hours.

Jarina enjoyed a meritorious day off on Friday, as Knight and Lister ventured north in PFH for a field route check and to

² Many of our senior pilots had received flight training in Pensacola under the auspices of the USMC MARCAT program, which required a minimum of two years college. Wayne, like Marius Burke, was interested in obtaining a full college degree.

afford Wayne a taste of what was occurring in the local Alternate area.

In 1967 the Knight family relocated from the Chet compound to a newly built house in Tony Poe's compound. When ordered to divest his Continental Airlines stock because of potential insider trading and an Agency conflict of interest, Tony sold his entire portfolio for about 80,000 dollars and used the proceeds to purchase the fairly large housing complex where Air America personnel had lived from the beginning of the program. Tony's exit from the securities game was kind of sad, for gone were the former stock guru's conversations and valued advice on lucrative stock purchases. ³

With Knight's future move to the States programmed and assured, he arranged for Lister and his family to reside in his house.

As Lister was now upgraded to senior instructor pilot (SIP) for Bell helicopters, he wanted to get his feet wet with an accomplished Bell Captain. Therefore, on Saturday he was scheduled to fly Papa Foxtrot Hotel with Jarina and Ortillo. During a full day that included thirty-seven landings, they conducted shuttles in the LS-272 area, then went north via Phou Fa to Phou Cum, and Bouam Long. The day ended almost an hour after sunset.

Mike was on STO over a week visiting his family in Bangkok. The time off was well timed, for the weather in the Long Tieng area had been exceptionally foul, preventing USAF air support around the area. It continued to be adverse, for when Jarina returned to the schedule on the twentieth, despite much circumnavigation, he was unable to proceed with Hotel far into

³Acting on his advice, especially regarding Walt Disney stock that rose in price, split, rose, and split several times, would have provided enormous gains to the astute investor.

the mountains. Eventually returning to Wattay Airport after one and a half hours, he was recalled to Udorn by early afternoon.

The regional monsoon weather pattern changed slightly on Tuesday allowing Mike and Terry Dunn to work Papa Foxtrot Hotel part of a day out of Sam Tong.

There was even more improvement the next day. With backed-up supply missions awaiting delivery to the scores of landing zones in the Long Tieng area, retaining Papa Foxtrot Hotel, Mike, John Fonburg, and Dunn conducted forty local supply operations out of The Alternate, mostly to the Site-72 area. Easing the job, RLAFF T-28 pilots and the USAF were able to resume bombing and interdiction operations.

There was one trip to a pad in the Khang Kho (LS-204) area. As a new Captain, John was flying from the right seat. The Bell was idling on the landing zone with individuals looking down on them from a higher pad. Suddenly a loud thump and vibration occurred in the rear. While Mike looked around to assess the problem, sensing incoming rounds, Fonburg, intending to launch, instinctively reached for the collective. The noise and vibration were expected, as Dunn had been loading a heavy mortar piece on the plywood decking. Jarina took the controls to prevent John from lifting, while asking Fonburg where he was going. Mike was surprised at John's action, for reputedly an easy-going person, Jarina had expected him to look around and ask, "*What was that?*"⁴

Mike retained Foxtrot Hotel on the twenty-eighth when he and Len Bevan returned to Military Region Two to work local Long Tieng and Sam Tong missions. With weather cooperating, they most likely set a new record by conducting ninety takeoff and

⁴ Perhaps Fonburg was still unnerved from our SAR incident the previous month.

landings during a ten-and-a-half-hour day. However, this entailed flying well after sunset.

Jarina ended the month flying with Ortillo in Papa Foxtrot Hotel. They spent part of the day working out of Long Tieng, then were sent to the Moug Nham (LS-63) valley east of Tha Thom to work for Agency Customer Dick Mann, recently returned to Laos from his wounding incident onboard Mike's aircraft during an early May SAR on the northern Plain of Jars. During a more sedate day they only flew seventy-two landings and two hours less flight time.

Since I was not available, Oscar Mike, Bart Brigida signed my July Crewmember Duty Report. Working in Vientiane, Bart had been with the organization for some time before being reassigned to Udorn. He was an enterprising person, who assembled a reasonably complete montage, accurate as to seniority, of 195 pilot photos on a map of Laos. Of course, no ambitious project like this could ever be perfect and some people were missing.

I liked to drink beer on my off time-a lot of beer. Somewhere along the way, I read a magazine article about Alaskan workers who mixed tomato juice with their beer at night. The nasty looking mixture seemed to ameliorate the deleterious effects of excessive alcohol so they were able to work a full twelve-hour day without a hangover. They were hydrating and getting an adequate amount of vitamin C at the same time. This appealed to me, so I began the process. The concoction did not taste bad, so I talked it up among my peers, but there were no takers. The first time Brigida entered the bar and saw me drinking the blend almost blew the old guy's mind. He had never seen this done before. Afterward, he would cringe and make a playful comment about my habit.

REVELATIONS

For years foreign correspondents, banned from venturing upcountry to report on the real war in Laos, struggled to disassemble the Gordian Knot hanging over the kingdom and expose the shadowy CIA and Air America activities there. Beset by bar and hearsay rumors and what embassy public relations (PR) officials were allowed to disseminate, most of the reporting was highly skewed or grossly inaccurate. On rare occasions when the media was allowed upcountry to witness refugee evacuations perpetrated by the advances of the dreaded Vietnamese, they were restricted to innocuous places like Sam Tong, largely divorced from the real war. Because of its sensitivity, Long Tieng was never on the schedule. One time a reporter from Bangkok managed to arrive at Sam Tong and walked over the road to Skyline Ridge overlooking The Alternate Valley. After being apprehended by Meo guards, he was very lucky to survive.

Over a period of more than eight years, because of deductive reasoning and personal observation that led to reporting in newspapers and magazines like *Time*, much was already written about Laos, but not all was divulged and never will be.

During September 1969, President Nixon cracked the door a little more revealing not-so-secret activities involving U.S. agencies in Laos. He acknowledged that the U.S. military conducted air reconnaissance over Laos, and "perhaps some other activities." It was these other activities that interested some members of Congress intent on terminating America's presence in Southeast Asia. With their appetite whetted, they were curious as to the support Air America and Continental Air Service introduced to the equation. This was particularly the case for Air America, a company often referred to as "*an operational arm of the Central Intelligence Agency.*"

On the morning of 23 July 1970, the *Columbia Broadcasting Service* (CBS) aired a fairly accurate expose on national television of CIA and Air America activities in Laos. Complete with film clips, one journalist reported from Vientiane; a former H-34 Flight Mechanic and a leading anchorman, speaking from Washington participated in the program.

The reporter based in Vientiane began by stating: ⁵

"It's one of the largest non-scheduled airlines in the world, but it doesn't spend a penny on advertising. It doesn't employ any hostesses or show movies or boast about its cuisine...Its business is war, and it has a steady paying customer in the U.S government. Both Air America and Continental's USAID contracts total 13 million dollars per year; eight million for Air America and five million for Continental. This is supposed to pay for the good work of flying around the men, machinery and food involved in foreign aid. In reality, more than half the flying is done in support of the CIA's paramilitary missions."

Paraphrasing, the man went on to indicate that Air America employed about 5,000 Americans and Asians, including 600 pilots. It operated from bases in Laos, Thailand, South Vietnam, Okinawa, Japan, with more than 250 airplanes and helicopters.

Owned by the Pacific Corporation, registered in Delaware, the company was private with no public securities. The web included CIA control.

⁵ Reconstructed and abridged by the Author, some glaring errors are either corrected or deleted.

Whether the broadcast was cleared by USG is unknown, but in our free society, probably not. While in the USMC, media reporting included impending troop movements and other information that was often correct, but we were cautioned by superiors not to substantiate it to outside entities.

The history of Air America at Wattay Airport, Vientiane began with operations out of a small building. Then it moved to offices in the Quonset Hut warehouse run by two pilots and a few local employees. Infrastructure developed in proportion to the war with six buildings. At present, more than 1,100 Lao, Thai, Filipino, and Taiwanese performed ground duties in Laos. Numbering 158, American pilots and copilots earned an average of 25,000 dollars a year that was largely income tax free. (This was a pre-FEPA estimate.) A smaller organization, CAS employed fifty pilots and 350 ground personnel.

"The intelligence cover for both organizations is the United States Agency for International Development, USAID. In Laos, CAS or the CIA has long found USAID a good cover. This was publicly admitted recently by USAID director, John A. Hanna, who said the CIA has been using USAID as a cover in Laos since 1962."

Confirming and reinforcing this account, the Washington source stated:

"...officials for the Agency for International Development admit that over the years, agents for the CIA have worked in Laos under an AID cover. They would like to end this arrangement but they know they do not have the clout in the bureaucratic sense to fight the CIA. They insist, however, that the number of CIA agents involved in Laos for AID is very limited."

Hundreds of hilltop bases dot the mountains of Laos. The CIA conducts war, while Air America planes and helicopters provide the bullets, beans, and bandages. Air America and Continental Air Services provide support for General Vang Pao's 10,000-man army.

"Air America flies in the food and ammunition and provides the means for getting to and from the war. It performs the same function for the CIA's 20,000-man army, a multi-national

[irregular] force of Lao, [hill tribe clans], Thai, Nationalist Chinese, Burmese, and Vietnamese [recently Cambodian], which along with Vang Pao's army constitutes the only effective anti-communist fighting force in Laos. Both are paid for and controlled by the CIA, which provides American operatives, usually recruited from the marines or Special Forces, to lead them."

...The military principle behind the hilltop bases is fighting guerrillas with guerrillas. The secret army is used to disrupt Laotian communist and North Vietnamese supply lines, plus keep an eye on China. The high ground is not only strategic. It represents the only avenue of retreat. The secret army could not exist without Air America's help. It fights and lives in the rugged terrain of north central Laos, right in the middle of communist-held territory. [In general], only helicopters and the Swiss-built single engine Porters can land and take off from the tiny hilltop landing strips.

The Air America pilots who fly to these bases earn every cent of their pay. The natural hazards of short takeoffs and landings are bad enough. The hilltop position, designed for trail watching and guerrilla support, change hands frequently. Before a pilot will touch down, he first must see the predetermined recognition signal laid out on the base...

Air America has no trouble finding pilots. It's not only [a matter of] money; there are those who get a kick out of danger, who cherish their Terry-and-the-Pirates image..."

Following the report from Vientiane, CBS anchor Marvin Kalb wound up the program adding these words:

"...The war, at least the American part of it, is largely a CIA operation...all of the secrecy goes back to the 1962 Geneva Accords, setting up a neutralist, coalition government and demanding the withdrawal of all foreign troops. [Believing they

were not foreign troops] the North Vietnamese never withdrew. There are now an estimated 60,000 of them there.

As the war intensified, the CIA expanded its military operations in Laos and the U.S. Air Force undertook a direct combat role. But very little is publicly admitted or discussed by either side, though both are in technical violation of the accords. One day the U.S. would like to restore them, and perhaps Hanoi shares that hope. That is why there is the official feeling here that the less said about Laos, the better.

The Senate, of course, has other views, and because of its building pressure, the Nixon administration has lifted the lid on some of its covert CIA operations in Laos in recent months. Still, some influential senators are not satisfied. They believe the CIA has too much unchecked power, even by a Congressional watchdog committee, too little public control over its activities in Laos and elsewhere.

The fact is, most congressmen and the public at large still do not know the full scope of CIA operations in Laos not their potential cost in money and lives. ⁶

RETURN TO CONUS

Aware there was no requirement to arise early for an LTC flight, I managed an untroubled night's sleep. In the morning, I composed a long letter to my parents describing the monsoon

⁶Segment Sources:
 EW Knight Email, 11/01/00.
 Mike Jarina Interviews.
 Harry Blount, *CHECO: Air Operations in Northern Laos, 1 April-1 November 70*, 12.
 Former Air America helicopter pilot Emmet Sullivan provided me the picture.
 Radio-TV Monitoring Service, Inc.-Radio TV Reports, Inc, CBS Morning News.
 CBS Television, Report on CIA activities in Laos-report on Air America, 07/23/70.

conditions in the city, which steadily proceeded from bad to worse, largely destroying much road infrastructure:

"Remember I told you that it had been raining quite heavily here and that we were flooded slightly? It kept raining and Udorn was flooded. We are higher on our side of town but the canal overflowed to an extent that I thought we would have to move upstairs. ⁷

Finally, the city came through our area and dug out everyone's driveway to relieve the back pressure. ⁸ This helped immediately and the water was gone from our yard in a short time.

The city remained flooded for a couple days after this but with a short dry spell now everything is dry again. The roads are completely destroyed and will cost millions to repair. ⁹

My front end [on the Cortina] is going again and I just had it worked on not too long ago. I should have the wheel bearings repacked, as the water I was driving through was very dirty. ¹⁰ The Ford is still drivable but it doesn't get the maintenance that it should have since I stopped driving it to Bangkok. I

⁷The overflow from the canal in front of the house failed to top the porch steps, but beside being unhealthy, snakes and other creatures had invaded our front yard.

⁸Trash had collected in and blocked the concrete culverts. After that part of the driveway was removed, we had to park on the street until the city placed a board bridge across the void.

⁹Hoping to obtain money, greedy city officials and much of the indigenous population blamed the USAF for the flooding because of the concrete runway and associated taxiway additions that did not allow water to soak into the ground. This accusation may have been partly true, but not entirely, as major landholders illegally dammed up some waterways on the outskirts of town for irrigation purposes.

¹⁰It was possible to drive through the flooded streets in the business section of town by maintaining positive engine RPM. If not, water would enter the tailpipe and stall the engine.

don't have the tools and am too lazy to do any work myself. Labor is cheap here but parts are not." ¹¹

During the afternoon, I tentatively drove over the badly torn up Tahan Thanon airport road to post the letter and also discuss with the Personnel Manager Udorn an inter-office routing slip initiated by Mister Tang, a manager in Taipei. The memorandum listed my accrued sick leave and the amount taken since my initial date of employment in September 1962. It indicated that my last illness exceeded the amount I had accrued by twenty-two days. Therefore, I was docked ten days from my annual leave. I was not happy, for I considered the last duty down time constituted a combat-related line-of-duty illness, which should not be included in normal sick leave. Fortunately, there were people who agreed with me, so the previous determination was eventually expunged.

During the afternoon, I stopped in the CPH office to chat and learn the latest information regarding home leave. Pleasantly surprised, I added a handwritten postscript to the letter:

"I just checked in the office and it's ok to take home leave now so I'll have to see how much we have to do before leaving. It is possible that we may be home before this letter arrives. It looks like we may be able to get a week or so extra."

07/04/70 Letter Home.

¹¹ Plang knew an automobile repair shop in town which charged reasonable prices.

After obtaining a green light for home leave from Wayne, who planned to take extended leave in August to complete a college degree, we began packing, attending to last minute details, and chaining the Cortina to a post in the carport. Then we boarded a small Japanese manufactured taxi for the train station. It was a good time to vacate Udorn, for the water level on flooded Prachak Road rose slightly above the door level.

I obtained the necessary discounted tickets for the family in Bangkok, and we departed Don Muang on Wednesday the eighth.

We arrived in Honolulu, Hawaii, port of entry or gateway to the States the same day. I had heard the customs department was very strict there, but did not expect the welcome awaiting us. As we were proceeding through the inspection line, after looking at my passport with the Air America chop, a burly supervisor dressed in a suit asked in a semi-stern voice, "*Where is your gold bracelet?*" Believing a heavy twenty-four carat ID gold bracelet displayed ostentatious wealth and was a target for theft, I had never bought one at the Vientiane gold shop.¹² Shocked, I said I did not have one, but removed my gold necklace containing the religious items from inside my shirt to show him. Obviously, the suit was merely playing with me and waved us through the line.

We had to wait for the next flight in a small non-air-conditioned terminal. The humidity was oppressive, adding to our discomfort from the long trip. Pete, who was an active child, did not help and scurried around the room. Finally, we were on our way to San Francisco, to rest and spend a couple days with Cousin Bob Anderson and his family in the tony Walnut Creek

¹² Pilots claimed they wore the gold against the day they were forced down and might have to provide ransom to obtain liberty. I always considered this rationale totally flawed, for any enemy would likely kill you and take your possessions anyway.

suburbs. Bob, who was assigned duty at the Presidio, picked us up at the airport. On the way to his house, Rick barfed on the back floor of Bob's car. The house was modest, but cozy.

Following a flight to Kennedy International and a taxi ride to Plainfield, we arrived home. Despite the phone call I had made from California, my aged parents were only partially ready to receive us, for the addition of four more people in that small colonial style house proved somewhat of a burden. Since family is everything in life, we overcame the temporary overcrowding and managed normal functions. The Mustang was still operational, so we were able to shop and visit friends that still remained in the area.

I had ambitious plans during our relatively short time home: Rick's problems had to be addressed, I needed to visit Steamboat Springs, and Tuie wanted to visit her cousin Noi and husband Bob in Boston. Because of the narrow time element, I scrubbed a projected trip to the tip of Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, where a resort project was underway in which Sunray, Don Valentine, and I had invested. Finally, if enough time was available, I wanted to spend a few days at the Jersey shore. When our neighbor John Lacamera, who owned two houses in Lavallette did not have an opening for our time frame, instead, we conducted day trips to the Sandy Hook National Park and ate delicious steamed clams at the Clam Hut, a place recommended by Gordon Fuller, husband to my Father's cousin Dot. Gordon was also a Customer's man at a brokerage firm that Dad and I used for buying and selling securities.

We did not go to New York for Rick's tests. Instead, with my Mother's sister Anna's help, we consulted Doctor Raymond O'Brian, who looked over Rick's medical workups from the Bangkok

Christian Hospital and the USAF. ¹³ Concurring that Rick required the services of a specialist, he referred us to neurology specialist, Doctor Dominic Scialabba in Plainfield. Since time was a concern, armed with the medical reports, I went immediately to the doctor's office to arrange an appointment for Rick. During the interview with Scialabba, I divulged all that I could recall regarding Rick's condition.

The first EEG with Rick conscious was inconclusive in nature because, like in Bangkok, he did not remain calm throughout the test. Since our time in the States was growing short, another session was scheduled. During the second test, Rick was fully sedated. This provided a clear EEG and resulted in enough information to conclude that he did not have a neurological problem or epilepsy. To prevent spike fevers, he was placed on a full course of Dialantin and I was assured the test results would be forwarded to me in Thailand.

Interspersed with resting, watching television, and visiting friends, Tuie went to Boston, and I booked a flight to Denver and then Hayden Airport, a few miles west of Steamboat. I had written Don and Charlie several times and never received a reply. Except for receiving the Steamboat paper, I was quite interested in catching up on Sunray and the area's progress toward being a first-class ski resort.

All was well at Mount Werner, so Don hired a local pilot to fly us to Spearfish in the valley below Terry Peak, South Dakota. In the couple of days we spent at the mountain I learned that the Warbonnet project was progressing well. The principals were the same and sales of lots were up slightly.

¹³A doctor visit was fifteen dollars in 1970.

I left Colorado for New Jersey, content that Don had the Company under control. If he prospered, I would also.

July morphed into August, and our time at home passed much too rapidly, reinforcing the adage that time passes fast when you are having fun.

WASHINGTON

Learning that I was home on leave, one day Bob Davis (DOH 03/01/66) called from the Washington headquarters, requesting that I fly down to assist him and Company officials in evaluating the twin turbine engine Bell 212. I assumed the Customer wanted a somewhat more reliable machine for clandestine work.

Bob had served in a Marine reserve squadron in Seattle, Washington, with Verne Clarkson as his commanding officer. After Verne departed for Air America, Bob wrote a letter and was also hired. Flying the line, he complained about H-34 maintenance and a pressing need to thoroughly test fly the machines before they were released for upcountry work. The result was the FCF program. Equipped with an advanced engineering degree, Bob was placed in charge of the program.

When the Company (to read Customer) became interested in obtaining a twin-engine helicopter, Bob was assigned to the Washington office to help search and coordinate with helicopter and engine companies.

With senior Bell representative EJ Smith ¹⁴ in Washington to demonstrate the 212, Bob said he would have the secretary

¹⁴ There was more than one technical representative named Smith working for Bell. Another had advised us shortly after we began flying the Bell 204/205 models.



Author Dick Casterlin grabbing a handful of popcorn, Captain Ed Reid to the rear, mechanics Tom Kothe, Stan Wilson, Captains Pogo Hunter, and Bob Davis attending a Rendezvous Club party.

Steve Nichols Collection.

forward a return trip ticket from Newark for me on United Airlines.

I arrived in the morning. As I made my way along the broad sidewalks and streets to the K Street office, I noted that Washington was still very hot in the summer. It had been almost eight years since my last visit, and the place looked much the same as I recalled. Mister Dawson was still there on the upper floors with his subordinate. I had talked to "Red" for the first time in the summer of 1962 while interviewing for the job. Then, I was sent to briefly meet the overweight, largely unimpressive CEO George Doole officially for the first time in his small Spartan office. Even as a lowly line pilot, I was aware that the man was very powerful, but found him formal, not someone who would conduct small talk or enjoy a beer with underlings. I also wondered if he was yet another Air America manager who believed in management by intimidation.

Doole was not loved. Opinions of those who knew him better were equally, if not more critical. Chief of Technical Services Udorn, Jack Forney sarcastically mused:

"He reigned supreme over Air America. He was the quintessential bureaucrat. Short, rotund, bald with a dark fringe, dapper in his shiny suit and arrogant with his importance, he insisted on his prerogatives and was not shy about letting it be known far and wide that the seat of power was occupied by his pillow-like hind end. George was articulate, but never more so than when he waxed eloquent on the mistakes made by those charged with carrying out his directions in the field or in defending the Washington office. His telegrams to the Far East were wordy and formidable and he always referred to the office as the Washington Headquarters.

...George was Chief Executive, a title he insisted be used in all communications, but he resided in the Washington office,

which also served as a U.S. support office-or should have. They hired people, bought or bailed aircraft, negotiated support deals, [interfaced] with various agencies of USG, and so forth. Since these support people were [members] of George's staff, their shortcomings were invisible to him and direction from the field to this staff [for] requirements rather blunted. If they bought an aircraft [like the Bell] without insisting on provisions of technical data, parts data, repair specifications, that was the field personnel's problem. [Then] if the field tried to rectify the problem directly with the vendor, that was seen as bypassing Washington 'Headquarters' which resulted in problems.

President Hugh Grundy received steady direction from Doole and suffered many unnecessary instructions from him with consummate grace. George's mandates were generally final, though difficult to swallow at times."

CPH Wayne Knight formed his opinions of Doole on a more personal level:

"...One would be hard pressed to find anyone who liked him, and most did not respect him either.

He was a terrible bore. On at least three occasions, Wayne heard a story from him concerning a low-level flight in bad weather down the Orinoco or some South American river while he was Chief Pilot for Pan American Airline's South American airline.

George had to be the center of attention at social functions, but he was at his nastiest in the boardroom. He gloried in abusing, shaming, and embarrassing lower-level managers.

Knight [professed meeting] Doole far too many times for his liking. One thing he learned in dealings with him was if he

asked you a question, he already knew the answer. He delighted in correcting and showing up anyone who took the bait."

THE FLIGHT AND INTERESTING REVELATIONS

While Mister Smith directed me through a brief preflight, Doole, Dawson, and Davis boarded the rear compartment of the Bell 212 at Washington International. I sat in the right cockpit seat. Smith, who I later worked with in Iran, started the engines from the left seat. Familiar with the area, he attended to all the particulars, like communications with the tower. After obtaining local clearance, I flew the machine for about fifteen minutes west to Dulles Airport. Except for the twin engine modification and other minor changes, I found the 212 handled about the same as the Bell 205. One thing I particularly liked, beside the security of two engines, was the added redundancy of two hydraulic control systems, something that would have served me well the fateful day at Bouam Long when I almost ended up in a ball.

After arriving to a hover on the taxiway at Dulles, I was directed to a crowded parking ramp that included several small planes. Fearing our downwash would turn over or damage the controls of one or more aircraft, and not wanting to assume the responsibility for this, I asked EJ to land.

That was the extent of my 212-cockpit experience. Fifteen minutes failed to allow me sufficient time for much of an evaluation and I wondered about the real motive involved in the effort and expense of bringing me to Washington. It certainly was not a meet and greet situation.

Bob and I rotated seats. As I mixed with the high mucky-mucks, he flew the 212 back to International.

The reason for my trip and Bob's part in it became somewhat clearer after we entered his small office. ¹⁵ When the Company began evaluating the pros and cons of various twin-engine helicopters, because of his educational engineering background and technical expertise, Bob was assigned to Washington to advise and implement the project.

To my surprise, Davis began inundating me with numerous charts and test performance data relating to Sikorsky's transformation of the UH-34D to a twin engine gas turbine helicopter that Washington was considering purchasing. Many factors, such as power, range, airframe, and ability to land on uneven terrain at high altitude were all assessed. Bob had carefully studied the Sikorsky-generated charts and concluded, that if valid and reliable, the statistics were indeed impressive. However, knowing where testing was performed (under optimum conditions on a factory tarmac), and a company's burning desire and proclivity to sell a product, I preferred a hands-on approach in the field to evaluate an aircraft.

Although the Bell people graciously assented to demonstrate their machine to our people, Washington (read CEO George Doole) had already tentatively elected to purchase Sikorsky's S-58T twin PT-6 turbine engine conversion package to install in the UH-34D airframe. Of course, this decision was not written in stone, but information CJ Abadie forwarded from Udorn was skewed earnestly toward the H-34 modification, largely because of the ability to land on hillside slopes and also attach a 150-gallon fuel drop tank to greatly increase range. Initial cost of the machine and parts availability, cabin size, load factor, and extended relations over the years with Sikorsky personnel, like regional technical representative, Archie Loper, all weighed

¹⁵ The workplace was not bare-bones, but nothing on the entire floor could be considered spacious or opulent.

heavily in the ultimate decision to purchase the conversion kit and assemble the Twinpac at the Udorn maintenance facility. The H-34's airframe, rotor system, and ability to perform at high altitude (albeit with pilot technique and experience) in the mountains of Laos had been well proven over the years.

As all this planning was in the future and my opinion was not required, Bob and I departed for lunch at a restaurant within walking distance of the office building. It seemed that Bob was happy away from the sniping and backstabbing culture that had a tendency to prevail at the Air America facility.

Upon return to the airport, I found the United Airline plane to Newark was still in the barn undergoing maintenance. The wait was necessarily long and did not endear me to the airline. I protested the delay by never booking another flight on United.

HOMEWARD BOUND

Our time in New Jersey was growing short, so we began preparing for the long trip to Southeast Asia. New clothes for the children and difficult-to-obtain or expensive consumables were purchased at the Sears and Pathmark department stores.

After confirming our tickets west, we departed Kennedy International for Los Angeles on the third week in August. Somebody had dropped the ball in the system and our highly discounted Pan American perimeter fare had not been confirmed over the Pacific route to Honolulu. Consequently, we had to remain on a standby basis until the last minute to board the aircraft. The same thing happened in Hawaii--wait until the last minute. I was chagrined: no family should have to endure this torture. Therefore, I intended to address the subject with people in the Personnel Office upon return to Bangkok and Udorn.

Our ticketing allowed us a few days respite in Guam. As a daily scheduled stop on the airline's routing system, this was no problem. I had arranged to stay in the accommodations of an older American gentleman who lived on the western part of the island. The chap picked us up at the airport and drove through a jungle environment that brushed the roadside to one of his cottages. A very friendly sort, who had married a local woman after completing his service career, he offered to drive us around the island if we wished.

Nature had not been kind to the old boy's infrastructure. Bare concrete slabs on his property attested to a 1962 typhoon that devastated his original cabins and tourist business. Undeterred, he had rebuilt one or two stark cinder block structures, calculated to withstand a serious storm, and planned to erect more when financially able.

It was still daylight when we arrived, but since we were highly fatigued from the time differences, instead of wandering around, we chose to sleep. I found this difficult because of the pervading heat and humidity and the presence of only one relatively inefficient window air conditioner that only touched the comfort level. Unimpressed with Guam, I planned to continue on to Thailand in the evening.

I was still groggy in the morning and could not do justice to the local cuisine served in the small restaurant. The complex was built on the edge of a cliff and a slope that flowed to the ocean. At low tide, a largely unattractive view included mud flats and a rocky shoreline. Always adventuresome, the boys chose to scramble down and investigate the area.

We left that evening for Bangkok. ¹⁶

¹⁶Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 264.

Bob Davis Letter.

Jack Forney Email.

Wayne Knight Emails, 11/01/00, 11/02/00, 11/05/00, 11/07/00.

Marius Burke Interview at Author's House, 05/01/98.

CJ Abadie Interview at the Author's House, 05/01/98.

It was time for General Vang Pao to switch from a defensive to an offensive mode. With the war in lower Military Region Two relatively quiescent, if not completely stabilized, weather slowing enemy logistics operations, and helicopter airlift available, the narrow window of opportunity had to be addressed before the dry season commenced. Able to operate in any but the worst weather, in previous years helicopters had always been the key to friendly troop movements during monsoon conditions. A man of patience, pragmatism, and extraordinary instincts, Vang Pao selected August to initiate his operation to retake Site-15. This would commence by:

"...a feint toward Moung Soui accompanied by a drive to the edge of the Plain of Jars...chief striking force would be Meo, but once the positions were secure, he planned to move in Thai battalions to hold them. The Meo would then revert to their traditional roles as scouts and guerrillas to raid onto the plain and to act as a mobile reserve at Long Tieng."

If successful, who knew what would transpire?

Despite a previous failure to retake the important site of Ban Na, Vang Pao clearly understood that enemy presence there presented a future threat to Long Tieng and Sam Tong, and impeded his limited wet season plans to regain lost territory in and around the Plain of Jars. In anticipation of a dry season offensive, the enemy had stocked supplies in some of the numerous caves off the southern Plain of Jars. They also used the hollows as concealed rally points for staging troop movements. Once identified, these containment areas were difficult for Allied air to neutralize. However, one talented

Meo T-28 pilot managed to skip a bomb into the small entrance of one cave. Ensuing BDA was considered impressive.

Conceived earlier, the Ban Na operation to improve the Long Tieng defenses was envisioned to commence in early August. Unlike the first weak attempt which employed under-motivated extra-regional troops to retake the site, a battalion composed of hill tribe guerrillas recruited from the Phou Fa, Phou Fa Noi, and Phou So areas in the hills north of Moung Soui was tapped to spearhead the attack from the northwest. In preparation, Raven FACs reconnoitered the area to spot targets, and plot likely sites for HLZs and troop insertions. Artillery from the east and Allied air would constitute the supporting arms.

BAN NA OPERATION

On the first Mike Jarina and Phil Velasquez crewed Papa Foxtrot Juliet to The Alternate. Conducting ninety-seven minimum time round trip landings and takeoffs, they supported efforts to implement the Ban Na operation.

During the week, horrible weather and a lack of aircraft restricted Mike and other helicopter crews from making the journey north. Taking advantage of monsoon conditions, not satisfied to relinquish control of hard-won land areas, the enemy struck and captured a fire support base (FSB) by employing mortar fire, sappers, and regular units. In addition to numerous casualties, the attack disrupted Vang Pao's Ban Na timetable, delaying the operation until the 18th.

Somewhat delayed by weather, Mike, John Fonburg, and Flight Mechanic Len Bevan returned to Long Tieng on the seventh in Papa Foxtrot Hotel. Double crewed, they were prepared to initiate the Site-15 troop movement, but the enemy attack on the FSB superseded this plan with a requirement to extract dead/wounded

from the impacted artillery site and move units into positions to attempt recapture of the lost site. After accomplishing this with the assistance of other helicopter crews, they returned to Udorn, landing well after dark.

Mike and Len returned to Long Tieng in Hotel on Saturday to continue supporting the defensive effort.

Two days later, flying Papa Foxtrot Gulf, after the CPH certified the ship airworthy, Jarina and Bevan launched north. Reaching Site-20A, they were redirected to work at Bouam Long. A helicopter is only a machine consisting of many complicated moving parts. Consequently, after landing at Site-32, a maintenance problem necessitated returning to Tango-08 with only four landings and four hours flight time.

The eleventh proved far more rewarding from a work aspect. Together, Mike and Bob Barrow conducted ninety-seven landings in the Phou Fa, Phou Cum, and Bouam Long areas.

Tuesday was not a good day for Captain Jack Knotts and Flight Mechanic Andy Anderson. After several shuttles of people and ammunition from Padong to the Hotel Victor pad (UG0422), located below the Khang Kho (LS-204) ridgeline, Jack crashed Bell 204B N8512F.

One never knew the true nature of security at Site-204. During this period, an unspecified number of enemy forces were reputedly located to the northwest overlooking the Plain of Jars, or in the valley. According to Jack, during his fifth trip, enemy firing commenced on the dusty, stumpy landing zone, and troops began scattering and hiding. Jack, who had landed to the north on the pad and was about half loaded, lifted off and began turning left to launch down a sloped hillside covered by brush, rocks, and stumps. Like other Bells, 12F's linear actuator was sluggish. Losing RPM and lift, the aircraft settled. The left skid contacted a tree stump, rolled half a

turn left, flipped over, and came to rest inverted on the rotor head and engine compartment. As the slightly injured crew and seven passengers exited the ship, a minor fire erupted in the engine compartment.

After the crew was repatriated to Thailand, during a debriefing, Jack maintained that his approach and departure route was influenced by hostile action near the pad.

Security permitting, CPH Knight intended to dispatch a maintenance crew to the site the following day or ASAP to investigate and evaluate the crash. ¹

Mike returned upcountry on the fourteenth with Charlie Weitz and Dimandal in Papa Foxtrot Gulf. In order to avoid the weather pattern in the northern mountains leading to Long Tieng, after over heading Paksane, they flew direct to Moung Nham, where they worked the area for Case Officer Dick Mann (call sign Bamboo). Completing this work, they returned to complete the day at Long Tieng and secured. Considered too exposed to potential sapper attacks, the hostel was not open for business, so, depending on Customer accommodations, some crews were cleared to RON at Site-20A.

On Saturday, Mike, now flying solo, supported local positions and then was sent to Site-63 to work. He also landed at Tha Thom, something not accomplished for a long time. Mike left Papa Foxtrot Gulf at Long Tieng and deadheaded home on Air America PC-6C, N392R.

¹ Jack Knotts' crash was in same area of Mike Jarina's incident with John Fonburg the previous month. Mike maintained to the Author that Jack *"panicked, pulled pitch, lost turns and crashed,"* all because of the misinterpreted booming sound of outgoing artillery shells.

Two days later Jarina and Casio struggled through adverse flying conditions to The Alternate. Unable to work, Mike deadheaded to Udorn on Fairchild C-123B, 293.

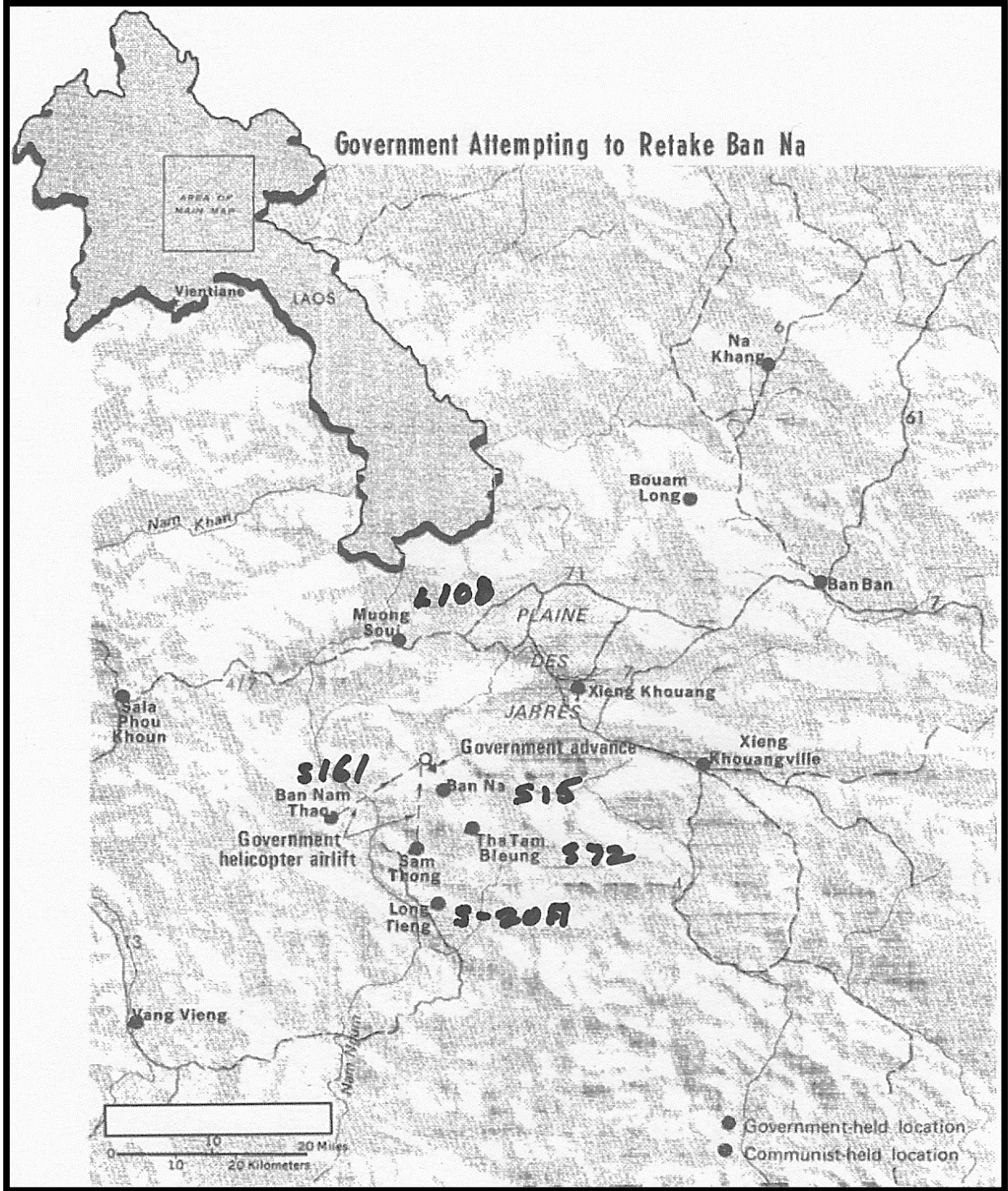
U.S. Intelligence reported:

"The relatively low level of North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao military activity may have been prompted in part by a desire to keep things quiet while the possibility of peace talks is explored. Difficulties in mounting attacks and moving supplies in extremely poor weather are undoubtedly contributing factors. Government forces, which usually take the offensive during the rainy season, have not been very active.

In the north [MR-1], only occasional contacts with the enemy have been reported recently in the areas to the north and west of the royal capital of Luang Prabang.

Southwest of the Plain des Jarres, the communists have staged several attacks on forward positions, but these apparently were intended to frustrate government efforts to retake territory south of the Plaine. The North Vietnamese forces inflicted heavy casualties, but did not seek to occupy these positions. Their units in this sector are believed to be considerably under strength as a result of the extended ground clashes and heavy bombing."

By the eighteenth, improved weather allowed Air America and USAF airlift, along with cover escort, to begin the Ban Na operation. More than five hundred troops were heli-lifted to northern hills, where, with little resistance encountered, immediately began search and destroy missions. However, within a relatively short time, weather conditions worsened, negating Allied air support. The earlier loss of the supporting fire



Area of the Ban Na operation.
CIA Map, 08/20/70.

base, plus enemy resistance to movement and attacks, limited attainment of major goals in recapturing Site-15. ²

Mike Jarina supported the operation on the 21st, moving and retrieving SGU teams intent on destroying supply complexes. When troops found C-4 explosive and other items, Mike was surprised at the quantity of resources the enemy had stockpiled. In one cave near the Plain of Jars, bunk beds were stacked in the enclosure.

Three days later, CIA intelligence sources reported:

"The government offensive southwest of the Plain des Jarres has run into enemy opposition. Taking advantage of poor flying weather, elements of the North Vietnamese 174th Regiment have mounted a series of sharp counterattacks against government elements attempting to recapture the [former] base at Ban Na. Additional guerrillas are now pushing into the Ban Na area from the south in an attempt to relieve the pressure." ³

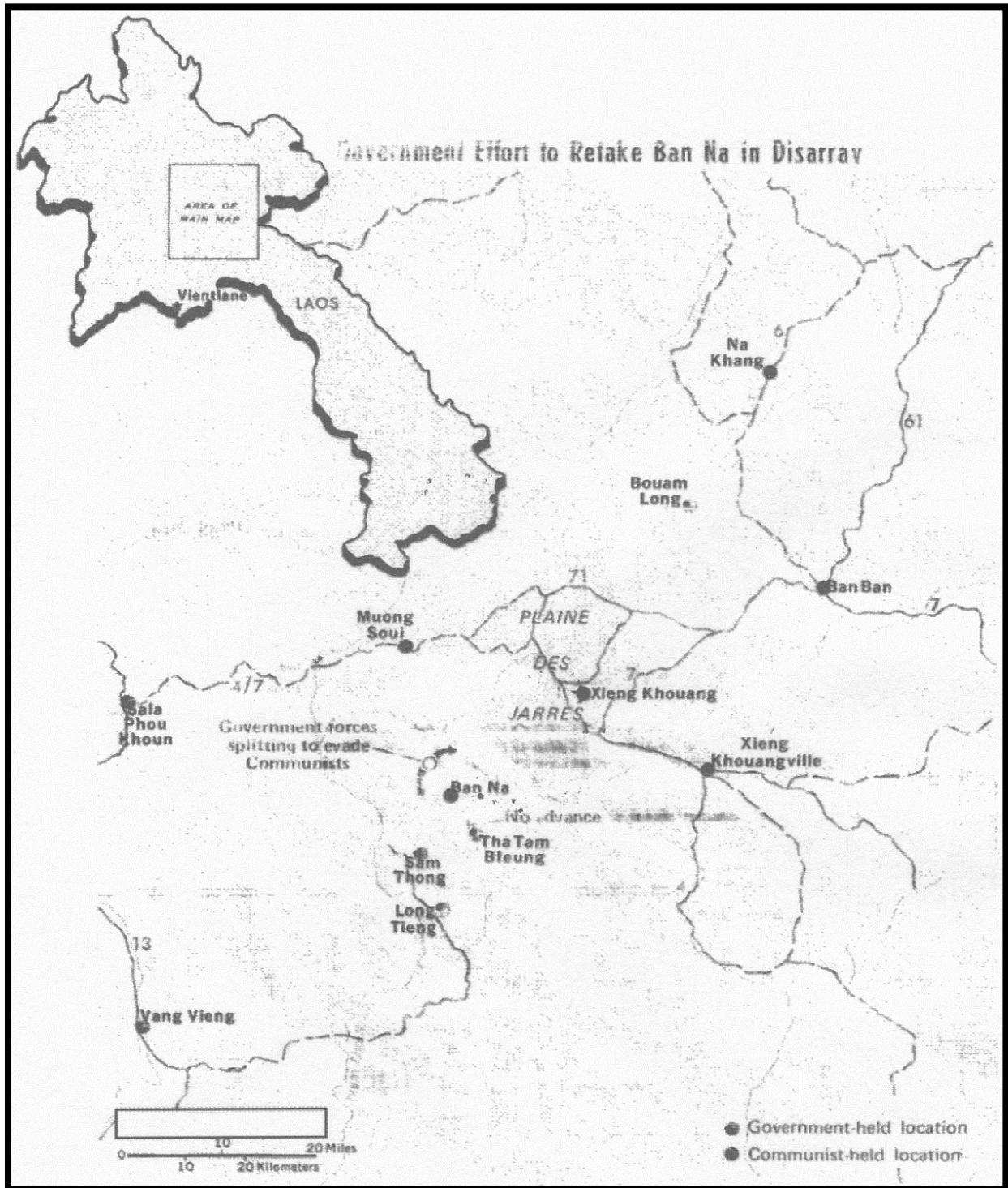
With little or no artillery or air support available, constantly pressured by the enemy, troop morale and motivation waned. Consequently, in little over a week, the Ban Na operation once again fizzled.

An intelligence report indicated:

"For the past ten days elements of the NVA 174th Regiment have been hitting hard at the battalion of irregulars that was air lifted to positions behind enemy lines about five miles north of Ban Na. The government force is now reported to have split its force to evade concentrated heavy weapons fire and the separate elements are proceeding north and south to the locations. An operation intended to relieve the isolated troops

² CIA Bulletin, 09/20/65,
(foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/documentconversions/5829/CIA-RDP79T00975A016900120001-1.pdf)

³ CIA Document, 08/24/70.



The latest attempt to retake Ban Na ends in failure.
CIA Map, 08/29/70.

by mounting an additional drive on Ban Na from the south has failed to make any headway.

Unless there is some abrupt change in the tactical situation, the communists appear to have succeeded in turning back the government's latest attempt to establish defensive positions closer to the Plaine des Jarres." ⁴

The Phou Fa-Phou So battalion departed the landing zone and moved northwest over the hills toward friendly elements maneuvering out of Xieng Dat. At the same time, the southern element withdrew from the field.

UDORN

"[Arriving in Thailand on the 24th] we spent two days in Bangkok resting and came up here to a flood-stricken town. Luckily, we missed the big flood but the roads are horrible. I was put right to work without time to do much of anything. I had to go to the park one morning to catch a helicopter to work."

09/03/70 Letter Home.

While we were still out of the country, particularly heavy rain had caused one of the worst floods in Udorn Town's history. Transportation infrastructure was in shambles. Parts of the main highway, Tahan Thanon, leading to the base from town, were washed out, rendering it virtually unusable. This affected ground and flight personnel's ability to travel to and from work. As a consequence, the ability to provide adequate service to the Customer was appreciably diminished for three days. Key personnel, managers, and flight crews were ferried to the

⁴ CIA Bulletin Daily Brief, 08/29/65. Laos: The ambitious government effort to seize Ban Na seems to be getting nowhere.

airfield in H-34s from centrally located high points located at city park and the railroad station.

The Air America facility was somewhat impacted, but was considerably less flooded than the center of town and environs.

Later, after the heavy rains ceased, CJ Abadie distributed a memorandum commending the various departments:

"On several occasions during the current rainy season, flooded conditions in and around Udorn have created situations which have hampered base operations impeded transportation, and generally endangered accomplishment of Air America's important mission.

Thanks follows to those who helped. Particularly wish to acknowledge the assistance rendered by the supervisors and personnel of General Maintenance, Traffic, Ground Transportation, Fixed Wing and Rotary Wing Maintenance Departments, and the Fire Brigade.

Gratifying that, once again, the Udorn 'can do' spirit still prevails."

Periodically over the years Mike Jarina moved in and out of the "Duck House." In 1970 Mike was still living there, but visiting his family monthly in Bangkok during STO breaks. This was the same house where he once observed Buddhist monks tying string around the perimeter and blessing the abode to purge it of any potential evil spirits. Another time, Mama San ⁵ called Mike outside to view a large Tokay lizard. Believing she was afraid of the ugly reptile, Mike said, *"Wait a minute. I can fix that."* He returned with his small rubber band spear gun used for spear fishing in the Gulf of Siam and shot the reptile. Then he realized that he might have committed a very serious cultural

⁵ A hold-over term used to describe a landlady or woman in authority by veterans of Okinawa and Japan.



Aerial view of washed out main highway and flooded countryside near Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base.

Air America Log, Volume 4, #8, 1970.



Downtown Udorn's Sawadee (Welcome) Circle — with double arches — completely surrounded by flood waters.

Air America Log, Volume 4, #8 1970.



Graceful pirogues stand by during Udorn flood.

Two disparate forms of human manpower transportation available to local residents.
Air America Log.



Pedicabs and motorbike negotiate watery Udorn street.

The reliable samlor driver could navigate roads in almost any conditions.

Air America Log.



Biking and pumping in front of AAM's Traffic Terminal.

Air America Log.



Flood makes a "canal" between Shops/Office building (l.) and Facility Maintenance Shop (r.).

Air America Log.



UH-34 picking up passengers from high ground near the Udorn railway station for transportation to UTH Base during flood.

Air America Log.



The "Duck House."
Mike Jarina Collection.

error by killing a living thing in a Buddhist nation. He was unsure what happened to the Tokay; perhaps she ate it.

During the great flood, people paddled by the house in foam napalm canisters discarded by the USAF. Like many of us, Mike kept a set of uniforms in his locker in the operations building. If the town was flooded at the end of STO, he would depart the bus from Bangkok at the main gate leading to the Air America compound, don his uniform, and go to work. If he arrived by train, rather than attempt to negotiate the flooded roads, he would hire a taxi at the station and proceed down the street to the Charoen Hotel instead of the "Duck House."

HOME AGAIN

Like normal tropical country problems that result from high heat and humidity after leaving a house closed and unoccupied for a prolonged time, things were not great at the house. Besides smaller annoyances inside, I discovered that the chained Cortina would not start. At least it was still there. Although not positive, I thought the battery was probably discharged from disuse.

Before we could get fully settled, our nice landlady, Khun Nong, came over from next door to inform us that she was going to sell the house to the bank, and the resident manager was going to live there. That was really disappointing, because I sincerely enjoyed living in the area and preferred not to move.

The following day, Nong changed her mind about selling the house. She indicated that her husband, Khun Meit, an official in the Thai Post Office, was being relocated to Bangkok. She would remain in Udorn. Her reasoning included the fact that she taught school and the children were still attending school. That was a refreshing bit of news and saved the hassle of trying to find scarce comparable accommodations for our growing family.

UPCOUNTRY

"Things upcountry are about the same as when I left. Rain has hampered things considerably."

09/03/70 Letter Home.

Leaving little time to unpack and organize items at the house, I was scheduled to fly on the 28th. As heavy rains had diminished, allowing water to drain somewhat, the Transportation Department was able to perform its function, moving employees in elevated ground clearance weapons carriers equipped with snorkels. However, extended travel time was required to negotiate the gauntlet of standing water impacting roads and the largely destroyed infrastructure leading to and from the airfield.

I did not have much time for normal chit-chat, but learned that CPH Wayne Knight, who flew through the 23rd, had already departed Udorn and Southeast Asia on extended home leave to attend school in California. As expected, former ACP, Phil Goddard, was elevated to helicopter chief pilot. Phil, a confident, political individual was easy to get along with and, like Wayne, had served his time in the trenches as a line pilot. As a result, he was generally respected and liked by our pilot force.

Although experimenting with RONs at Alternate that depended on the availability of Customer accommodations, Long Tieng commutes (LTC) were still the norm. Because I had no time accumulated for the month, adhering to the mandate for cockpit buddies to share deadhead time, I was obliged to fly one and a half hours with Pat Colgan and Tod Younglich in Papa Foxtrot Hotel to Site-20A. Working locally, we were able to supply local

landing zones for almost a full day, recovering at Tango-08 at dark.

During the previous day, Tuie managed to have the Cortina repaired. Running smoothly again, she drove slowly to city park the next morning, located only two blocks from the house, so I could board a H-34 shuttle to the field. I had to admit that, although it took more time waiting for the ship, it was an excellent alternative for going to work.

A two-aircraft Special Mission was planned by the Customer out of Savannakhet on Saturday. It involved John Fonburg and Ortillo and me in Papa Foxtrot Juliet and another crew. I sat on my hands enjoying the one hour plus twenty minutes deadhead time to Lima-39; John was obliged to log deadhead on the return trip. With the landing site located deep in the denied area, mission time was one plus fifty.

With security deemed satisfactory and cleared by FEPA's hierarchy, Sunday marked the first time we RON at Long Tieng since March. Perhaps the horrible transportation conditions in Udorn, and the trouble employees had getting to and from the airfield, had some bearing on this decision; besides, I was well behind other pilots in total flight time for the month and year.

Flying Papa Foxtrot Hotel with Flight Mechanic Ortillo, I worked most of the day supporting the Long Tieng area, and briefly the Phou Fa-Phou So unit that had withdrawn from Ban Na and joined local defense troops from Xieng Dat. Three days previously the mixed units began desultory movements twelve miles northwest toward Moung Soui. Encountering no enemy resistance, except foul weather and muddy conditions, an advanced party reached the western perimeter of Site-108 by month's end, while the main unit struggled to catch up. Within two weeks, the tough Vietnamese units still in the area rallied and rejected the government forces.

After a peaceful night at the recently reopened hostel, we had to wait for low clouds and fog to lift and for clearer conditions before launching. Down time in the valley was never fun, for dampness penetrated our thin clothing and it was boring with little to do. A break came in the afternoon and we actually flew twenty local missions, managing less than five hours before retiring. ⁶

⁶Segment Sources:

Harry Blout, 13-14.

John Pratt, 154-155.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 265.

Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 337.

Bill Leary August 1970 Notes.

08/15/70 CIA Bulletin, Fighting has dropped off considerably with the communist forces adopting a defensive posture.

Mike Jarina Interviews.

Jack Knotts Interview.

Air America XOXO, 12F, EW Knight.

Joe Leeker, 12F.

08/24/70 CIA Bulletin, Laos.

Air America Log, Volume 4, #8, 1970.

Photos from the *Air America Log*, Volume 5 #8, 1970.

CJ Abadie Commendation in the Mentioned Log.

EW Knight Email, 11/01/00, 11/02/00.

Early morning on the first of September, a low ceiling associated with the monsoon again impacted the Alternate Valley. Since the Customer had supplies stacked and backed up on the lower ramp for perimeter defense positions, we were anxious to fly. A designated Raven usually took off first with a local flight to assess area weather and gather current situations at the forward pads. Then, he would radio a pilot report (PIREP) to the Customer and a decision would be made whether to launch the helicopters or wait for improved conditions. Sometimes this method resulted in taking off prematurely, but most of us adopted a conservative stance.

I managed to fly a little more than the previous day.

Wednesday afforded slightly more flight time, which included a mission west of Moung Soui to support efforts to recapture the airstrip.

My RON complete, I deadheaded to Udorn on a rare Jolly Green 5-4576 flight.

UDORN

The wooden bridge installed after the city cleared the canal in front of the house was rickety and about ready to collapse. Afraid to drive the Cortina into the yard, pending bridge repair, Tuie parked the car in another area.

Ricky had developed tonsillitis again. Unable to drive to the USAF hospital, Tuie took him to a Thai doctor in town for treatment. Since tonsils seemed to be the focal point of his problems, we resolved to have them removed in Bangkok if adequate medical facilities and personnel were available.

"We are about to get some new types of helicopters and I haven't made up my mind whether to switch or not."

09/03/70 Letter Home.

I had the third off the flight schedule, or thought I did until summoned to the field to participate in a CH-53 familiarization flight. Looking ahead to the near future, when the U.S military could no longer help support the war in Laos because of the planned withdrawal of U.S. military forces in Southeast Asia, and onerous Congressional restrictions on funding, the Customer was interested in obtaining a heavier lift helicopter than the H-34 or Bell, one that was able to move artillery guns and large numbers of troops in Military Region Two and other areas. The proposed two turbine engine S-58T was still an option from a safety aspect, but it was not really a heavy lift machine, or yet fully developed and tested.

While I was still on home leave, Scratch and Wayne flew a USAF CH-53 locally for evaluation. Wayne received forty minutes from the right seat. Afterward, the CPH composed a glowing report for Company management types stating the aircraft would constitute an excellent addition to the helicopter fleet.

Since Wayne had already departed on leave, I boarded an Air Force CH-53 with Scratch. Monitored by an Air Force IP, he flew locally while I sat in the jump seat at the entrance of the cockpit and observed. Afterward, Kanach gave me a CH-53 manual to study. I looked it over twice, but was not convinced that I should switch programs. Anyway, knowing past starts and stops, this drill still represented a to-be-announced (TBA).

MR-3 OPERATIONS

Earlier, the Savannakhet (SVK) unit had been instructed to form 550-man battalions, twice as large as their normal

battalions, to satisfy defensive requirements in General Vang Pao's Military Region Two Theater. Two were assembled. They included Case Officers who, upon reflection, humorously opined the units looked like Maeng Da (literally Waterbug), Lao slang for a drugstore cowboy.

The first Waterbug battalion was formed, trained, lightly indoctrinated, and then dispatched to the field in order to learn and acquire battle experience while attached to two seasoned battalions. This was sometimes called by an appropriate word: bleeding. The new unit was scheduled to operate as long as only few casualties were incurred. After the unit gained actual experience, it would be rotated out and fresh Maeng Da types injected for combat indoctrination.

There was some heavy fighting and according to eyewitness advisor Don Courtney, many Vietnamese were killed by air (KBA) during Skyraider attacks. At a time deemed appropriate to implement rotation, surprised Vientiane superiors, previously apprised of the plan, threatened to fire all Savannakhet advisors, indicating that only fatigued units could be removed from the field and no new ones introduced. Heeding this restriction, the cowed Savannakhet unit had the newly formed unit removed by helicopters. Rather than requiring other under strength battalions to remain in the field and incur unnecessary casualties, they instructed them to withdraw on foot to more secure areas.

Battalion and multi-battalion Agency-sponsored SGU operations had continued through late spring into summer out of the forward Tangvay (LS-299) base. The intention was to sweep the area and interdict the southern portion of Route-23 at the Bang Hiang River intersection, called the "Catcher's Mitt." Encountering resistance, the units withdrew toward Route-111 west of Tangvay. Since Air America helicopter support was

required in Military Region Two, most sizeable Savannakhet troop lifts were undertaken by USAF Pony Express CH-3 helicopters from Nakhon Phanom to points where the troops could walk into the field.

Another battalion-sized operation commenced north of Moung Phalane (L-61) toward Route-23. Not amounting to much, the push was over by the end of June.

During July a more ambitious multi-battalion thrust with eventual designs on the Tchepone area was planned from Tangvay southeast toward the "Catcher's Mitt," a prominent loop in a river.

Agency intelligence reported:

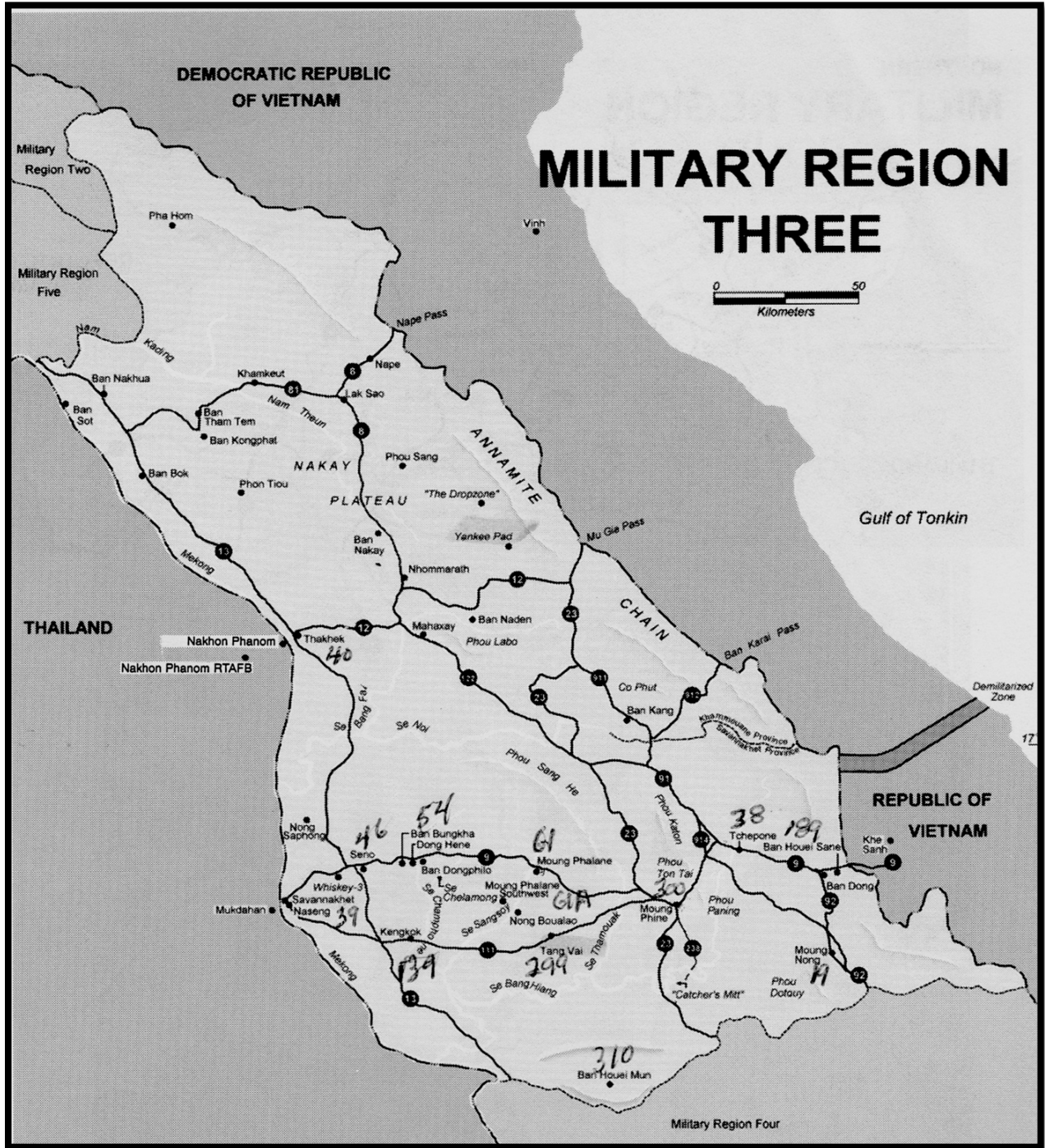
"...three irregular battalions involved in the government's efforts to harass the communists' Route-23 supply line south of Moung Phine [LS-300] were forced to break contact on 18 July after two days of heavy fighting. Enemy casualties were substantial and significant quantities of ammunition, weapons, food and documents were reported captured or destroyed."

"...occasional heavy fighting along Route-23 south of Moung Phine has been slowed by heavy rains."

This operation also ended with units withdrawing to Tangvay by the fourth week in July.

With men still in the field, yet another limited operation commenced in early September to invest the northern Toumlan Valley and disrupt enemy Route-23 logistics flowing toward Saravane, where the last government outpost was eliminated on 13 August.

At the same time the Bolovens Plateau operation was underway, during mid-September the move was also supported by a reinforced mixed American and ethnic three-platoon heli-borne reconnaissance in force from South Vietnam on the Chavane area, which also served as a diversionary action for Operation



Savannakhet region of Laos where Agency-sponsored SGU battalions spent weeks in the field attempting to interdict and disrupt traffic along enemy lines of communication.

Ken Conboy 433 (Author's addition of Lima and Lima Sites).

Gauntlet, but with the primary objective of obtaining intelligence. Despite numerous wounded (WIA) and helicopter losses, the operation was deemed successful in inflicting enemy casualties, destroying ammunition, and obtaining valuable intel.

A 22 September Agency synopsis was issued:

"Government forces have recently mounted a series of guerrilla attacks against the Ho Chi Minh Trail and other enemy controlled routes in the panhandle. [In MR-4] small teams of irregulars have been operating along Route-96 south of Chavane [east of the Bolovens Plateau and the Se Kong valley] during the past week, mining the road and ambushing NVA patrols. Farther north along the same route, government forces have become engaged in at least one firefight about 18 miles southwest of Ban Bac. So far, the teams involved in these raids have reported only limited opposition.

To the west [in MR-3], at least five battalions of irregulars are moving toward Route-23 in an attempt to deny the use of the road to the enemy. Two battalions totaling about 600 men, are now within ten miles of Ban Toumlan [e]; since 12 September they have clashed several times with small Pathet Lao and NVA units. A third battalion is reported to be moving east along the south bank of the Bang Hiang River, where the communists have recently established a logistical control unit. To the north, two additional battalions have been working their way eastward along Route-9 since early this month and are now reported to be within ten miles of Moung Phine.

It seems unlikely that the communists will permit these incursions to continue much longer without strong opposition. The North Vietnamese have brought significant numbers of new troops into the panhandle from North and South Vietnam this summer, presumably to guard against operations of this sort. In addition to striking back against the government guerrilla, the

communists may also launch some major attacks of their own in the western panhandle in order to force the Laotian military back on the defense..." ¹

At the end of October, President Nixon received information from Henry Kissinger regarding Military Region Three's Gauntlet operation. Most likely highly inflated, the report indicated that 600 Vietnamese were killed and 500 wounded (likely by air). However, as with most ground operations, only minor disruptions to enemy LOCs had been achieved, at the cost of many friendly casualties and loss of morale. ²

On Friday, I was scheduled to fly to Savannakhet with Phil Payton and Flight Mechanic Dimendal in Papa Foxtrot Juliet to RON and support Customer sponsored Special Missions. Within a few minutes of launching, we encountered a maintenance problem and had to return to Udorn.

Employing Filipino Flight Mechanics for road watch missions was not the norm. If not a highly classified Special Operation, which would certainly exclude them, it was probably because of a perceived language barrier that existed among some older, but not all Filipino employees, particularly the younger, better educated men. ³ This would be alright during everyday "normal" work, but for road watch missions, comprehension and initiative was imperative in a pinch. Besides, we had an adequate supply of American Flight Mechanics to crew the Bells.

¹ CIA Daily Bulletin, 09/22/70.

² Gauntlet was a backroom designation or official Washingtonese not liberally employed by local Case Officers to describe ambitious operations in Military Region Three and Four. Don Courtney does not recall hearing the term.

³ I suppose that knowing and speaking a combination of Tagalog, Spanish, and English dialect that sounded like tick-a-tick would confuse anybody without an ear attuned to the language.

With maintenance personnel assistance, we managed to get the ship in the air the next day for the work at Lima-39. The mission involved moving SGU troops from Ban Keng Kok (LS-139), twenty-eight miles east of Savannakhet, to a point thirty-nine miles east-northeast to WD8332, on Route-9 between MOUNG PHALANE and MOUNG PHINE. Moving along an improved road, they could observe and harass enemy movement on the Route-9/23 junction just west of MOUNG PHINE.

The RON at the hostel afforded me the opportunity to slip down the street before dinner for a tasty Japanese beer at the open-air shop-house establishment there. Like Henri's drink shop in Pakse, the owner was very hospitable to us. It could have been purely economic, but seemed genuine.

Despite the Customer need for these intelligence forays into the eastern Panhandle, they were unpopular with crews because of the long, boring waits for weather, escort ships, recons, and positive contact with teams in the field. Some Customers scheduled late afternoon team insertions to enhance secrecy and provide the team opportunity to seek cover and concealment before dark.

Sunday's road watch Special Mission involved a flight to XD227703, eighty-one nautical miles east-northeast of Savannakhet. Like many of these long-range forays, this one included crossing enemy-controlled Routes-23 and 911. After studying photo reconnaissance, the Customer generally planned road crossings that sometimes required other than direct routes over the least likely locations where AAA would normally be present on the muddy, impassable roads. This method worked well, and flying at altitude, we rarely encountered problems.

The landing zone was located in forested hills north of Ban Pakok, east of a valley with many feeder trails leading to



Our beer drinking shop-house in Savannakhet located close to the Air America Hostel. The proprietor aped for the Author with a hand salute.
Author Collection.

Route-911, flowing south toward the logistics center at Tchepone. We returned to Lima-39 before dark, after flying our maximum combat range of two and a half hours. ⁴

With scheduled and unscheduled missions backed up, the seventh was a busy day with double assignments. We began by relocating to the Whiskey-3 training site to load a team for WE6221. Often used in the past, the landing zone was fifty miles north-northeast, located in the hills four miles north of Route-23. Then we flew forty-five miles south-southeast (WD8330) to extract troops near the insertion point on the fifth.

After fueling, the second phase of our mission included a team infil to XD0217, sixty-five miles east of Savannakhet on high ground six miles southwest of MOUNG PHINE; extraction of a nearby team from XD032167 followed. The team's mission had involved observing and reporting on enemy traffic that might impact the multi-battalion Toumlan operation (also referred to Gauntlet-2), an undertaking that succeeded in penetrating 20 miles toward the valley. With no contact established, the operation terminated toward month's end.

The RON had been uneventful, and we left late for Udorn, arriving at dark.

A QUESTIONABLE MISSION

As an exfiltration on the eleventh attested, not all missions in Military Region Three proved uneventful. Unscheduled events sometimes caused crew confusion, disrupting the normally smooth operations.

⁴ For some inexplicable reason I later received a letter dated 22 January 1971 from JW Walker, Air America VPFO. It stated: *"I wish to express my deep appreciation for your participation in the outstanding operation on 6 September 1970. Your professionalism, unhesitating response and courage was most impressive."*

A three Bell mission to extract sixteen troops from a high border area near Mugia Pass commenced from Thakhet. Crews included Ed Reid, a Co-Captain, and a Filipino Flight Mechanic; Mike Jarina, Nikki Filippi, and Terry Dunn; Scratch Kanach and his crew fulfilled the role of SAR.

Before they launched, the Customer cautioned them not to fly east of the landing zone, for that was in North Vietnam. Despite the warning, Scratch picked up seven rounds while conducting a recon on the east side. Ignoring the action, a decision was made to continue with the extraction.

While Mike circled and their A-1E cover pilots seeded the area with CBU bomblets, Ed began an approach to retrieve the first eight men. Minimum time on the ground was the preferred procedure on these missions, but Ed was slow departing, so Mike had to circle an additional two times. He did not learn what transpired until they returned to L-40. Ed had told his Flight Mechanic to board eight people. Within a reasonable time, he asked the flight mechanic if they were loaded. Receiving an affirmative answer, Ed asked, *"How many?"*

"I have nine."

"Damn it! I told you only eight. Put them off." ⁵

When Ed turned around, he noted that all nine troops had departed the cargo area-and they were confused.

After Ed departed, Mike landed and only one person boarded instead of eight. When he relayed this to the flight leader, Ed recommended he remain on the ground a little longer, for more

⁵ This was the same Flight Mechanic Jarina had encountered language problems with during past flights. Americans were preferred Flight Mechanics for Special Missions. However, there were no hard and fast Customer rules regarding Third Country Nationals, but Filipino Flight Mechanics were used sparingly during road watch team missions for language reasons.

might be coming up the trail. Mike waited a bit then after Scratch indicated he did not see anyone approaching, Mike left.

On the way back, an A-1 pilot called saying, *"You better do something, as AAA is going up your butt."*

Mike radioed, *"That is ok. It is behind us."* Then he realized there was only Scratch, Ed, and himself. No one else was in the flight. Alarmed, he said to no one in particular, *"Oh boy, I am the last guy."*

Unable to restrain himself, Nikki shouted, *"Do something!"*

Dunn indicated the fire was on the right side. While Scratch pulled up into the clouds, Mike continued following Ed, as he had not been hit yet. Nikki looked at Mike and then removed his large gold chain holding many Buddhist images and placed it on the console. (This chain was the largest I had ever seen and must have weighed two pounds.) Mike thought Nikki was being facetious, but he indicated that he was being serious.

The crews continued Special Missions on Saturday. Working out of Thakhet, four missions were conducted before RTB Udorn.

MR-2

"I am spending three nights upcountry at a time as the situation has eased somewhat. We are still a long way from where we were before, but are making some gains as we do in the rainy season. There aren't nearly enough foot soldiers to go around. It is somewhat pathetic."

09/19/70 Letter Home.

Andy Anderson and I crewed Papa Foxtrot Juliet to The Alternate on the eighth. Before departing, the Maintenance Department requested I retrieve the data plate from the cockpit of 12F, a 204B that Jack Knotts had crashed at Khang Kho on 11 August. In case an aircraft proved impossible to recover because

of total destruction or a temporary enemy presence, data plates were necessary in reconstruction, a process at which Udorn maintenance was so adept. Alignment jigs were available (wink-wink) as were the finest sheet metal workers in the world. With this ability, and parts from other crashes stacked high in back of the hangar, to the chagrin of the Bell Helicopter Company, given sufficient time, a relatively new Bell helicopter could emerge from the hangar.

The Khang Kho ridge and environs were still considered no-man's-land. Not knowing what to expect, with weather fairly good, I briefed Andy at Padong that his normal hustle obtaining the plate was paramount once we landed at the wreck site.

The operation was anticlimactic. Although I expected some groundfire, after I screamed into the landing zone, flared, landed, and Andy accomplished his mission in a relatively short time, we were back in the air pursuing "normal" work in the Long Tieng area.

The Maintenance Department performed its miracle and I flew 12F on 17 October.

After spending a night in the valley, we continued to supply the mixed force positions in and around Long Tieng. Since Juliet was scheduled for a hundred-hour inspection, we were recalled to Udorn and landed well after dark. Andy rotated to Papa Foxtrot Gulf and Ortillo joined me for the ferry flight.

Following a good meal at the Club Rendezvous, a weapons carrier was employed to take me home, for the flooding was so bad in town that our blue Volkswagen busses could not negotiate the torn-up roads.

On Friday, since we were still riding to work by H-34 Tuie drove me to the park. I deadheaded north in C-123K 556 to double crew Papa Foxtrot Gulf with Ivar Gram and Anderson. The Special Mission was programmed to salvage what was possible from the

failed attempt to reclaim Moung Soui, hold territory, and prepare for future opportunities to move northeast toward Site-108. Along with other aircraft, we shuttled troops into and removed sick, lame and lazy individuals from TG6155, located three miles north of Xieng Dat between Ban Nam Chat and Ban Phone, and just south of Route-7.

We remained double crewed against the possibility of additional missions and emergency wounded extractions. Relatively good weather still permitted a full day in the air.

Delayed most of Sunday morning by low clouds and fog that impeded departures through Long Tieng gaps, we still managed to fly almost six hours.

Mike Jarina was back at Alternate in Papa Foxtrot Juliet. He shuttled men between Bouam Long and Phou Fa (LS-16) in support of the unwinding Moung Soui operation.

The large enemy supply depot at Moung Sen, located inside the North Vietnamese border, remained a choice Agency target from a tactical and psychological viewpoint. The May foray by the Commando Raiders had been a disaster, but lessons had been learned, and a second attempt in July by a much smaller unit was successful in rocketing and destroying tanks.

On the fourteenth, conducting two Special Missions, we inserted twelve raiders and their equipment south of Sam Song Hong (LS-201). After clandestinely making their way across the border, the men moved close enough to the supply area to destroy several trucks with light weight M-72 anti-tank (LAW) missile launchers. After firing the single-shot rockets, the five and a half pound units were discarded and the team departed at high port.

Toward the end of the day, leaving Gram and Andy to fly Golf, I deadheaded to Tango-08 on Air America Porter N359F.

The crew of Papa Foxtrot Juliet worked the Site-72 and Padong areas in anticipation of an operation to the east. Jarina remained upcountry on the fifteenth, again moving troops from a now quiet Bouam Long and Phou Vieng (LS-06) to Phou Fa and Phou So (LS-57).

Mike's replacement was waiting at Long Tieng, but as it was too late to RTB, he remained overnight and deadheaded to Udorn on C-123 545 the following day.

As the war in Southeast Asia continued winding down, beginning in the summer and continuing through year end, many tactical aircraft were withdrawn from Thailand. Severely impacting operations in Military Region Two, the 11th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron at Udorn was deactivated. Sixty F-105s based at Takhli were repatriated to the U.S. Two of three A-1 squadrons and crews were deactivated at Nakhon Phanom, reducing the number of Skyraiders to twenty-five. The loss of our beloved Skyraiders did not bode well for tactical air support in Barrel Roll, or the need for escort planes on Special Missions. Not only lacking appreciable loiter time, jet aircraft were considered far too fast for efficient pinpoint ground troop close support. Therefore, RLAF T-28 and AC-47 gunships would have to take up the slack, something not possible with the RLAF mounting losses. It was obvious that closer coordination for Lao air strikes would be needed between USAF and Vientiane embassy units.

The two thirds reduction of A-1s portended a dismal outlook for the upcoming dry season, one traditionally a time of enemy advances. Moreover, unless Vang Pao's exhausted troops could produce a miracle and push the enemy farther away from the Long Tieng/Sam Tong defensive salient, the upcoming year would be grim.

Even more damaging to the war effort in Military Region Two, and in Laos in general, U.S. Congress had mandated a maximum number of sorties for all of Southeast Asia. Military Region Two was limited to thirty sorties per day unless increased action demanded more.

STO

It had been an exceptionally wet year thus far in the northeast. Heavy rains continued exacerbating damage to an already soaked area. Always rationalizing events beyond their control, and fond of playing the blame game, some Thais still claimed that improvements at the airbase caused flooding in town. I heard that millions of baht had been promised by the Bangkok government to rebuild the town road infrastructure. However, although supposedly allocated, there was no report of any funds arriving yet for the project.

Leaving Pete home with the servants and Khun Yai, we taxied through high water to the train station. Because the station and tracks were high and dry, the area was used for H-34 pilots to ferry employees to the Air America facility. Still, I wondered what the area would look like when we returned to Udorn, and if we would be able to hire transportation home.

The primary reason for our trip was to find and have a specialist assess Ricky's tonsil problem. The Thai nose and throat clinic recommended to us by Judge Prasat's son, Doctor Manat, was owned and operated by leading Thai doctors. Chief surgeon was Doctor Asawin Tepakhom, a renowned doctor who catered to the Royal family. Indeed, Doctor Asawin had removed the Crown Prince's tonsils. Following an initial consultation and very thorough examination, the doctor agreed that Rick's tonsils should be removed. He also believed sinus problems might be aggravating the tonsils and recommended removal of his

adenoids. Since it had taken time to obtain an appointment and our STO was brief, we would have to return the following month for the operation. In the meantime, I needed to trace the missing EEG report from Doctor Scialabba's office, as Doctor Asawin wanted to view Rick's history. ⁶

We were now residing at the four-star Montien Hotel on Suriwongse Road. The fairly new and centrally located hotel offered a decent discount to Air America employees and was a major step up from any place we had previously stayed in Bangkok.

While still there I walked down Patpong Road past the Air America office, businesses, bars, and restaurants to the Bangkok Christian Hospital for a periodic amoeba test. It was positive again, something I expected because I was experiencing telltale excess gas and headaches. Since the symptoms were not especially debilitating, I chose to take the medicine for two weeks.

MR-2 AND LONG TIENG

It was essential for Vang Pao to recover as much critical terrain for the defense of Long Tieng as possible during the waning wet season. A late month CIA Intelligence Bulletin indicated that Vang Pao's troops were on the move in late September:

"Three guerrilla battalions have driven to within three miles of Ban Na, a key hilltop position guarding a major communist infiltration route south of the Plain.

⁶The error was entirely mine. I had provided the Scialabba people with an Army Post Office (APO) address for our Medical Department. The department was not considered a valid APO address, resulting in the records being returned.

To the southeast, two government battalions which were airlifted to Khang Kho on 16 September are now advancing [northwest] toward Moung Pot. ⁷

The government is also making progress in the Moung Soui area where some 1,200 irregulars are closing in on the deserted town. A substantial force of Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese troops is known to be in the area, but so far has offered only scattered opposition. Although it lies astride Route-7, Moung Soui, as a major Lao neutralist headquarters in the past, has more political than strategic importance. ⁸

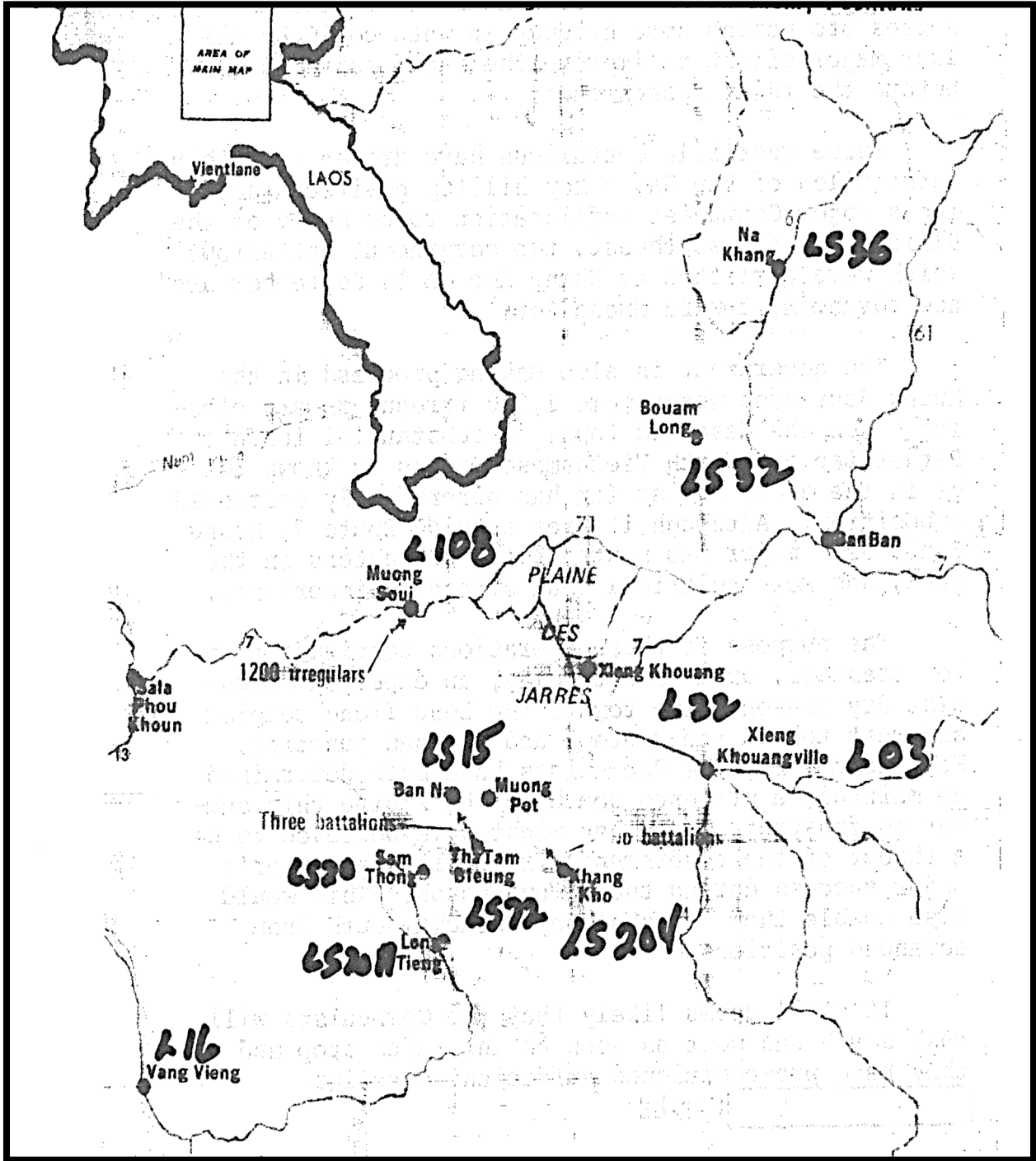
The purpose of these operations continues to be to forestall, or at least delay, an expected communist dry season move toward the Long Tieng complex and west toward the Route-7 and 13 road junction. For their part, the communists have been determined to maintain a presence south of the Plaine this summer to frustrate what they might have believed to be a threat of the government's repeating last year's major success during the rainy season. This would also enable them to mount any attacks south from advanced positions.

It still seems likely that the communists will push south and west as soon as the rains stop and they have pre-positioned sufficient supplies." ⁹

⁷ This movement occurred after conducting a successful operation to destroy an enemy supply depot to the east on Route-4.

⁸ During mid-September strong enemy counterattacks and foul weather precluded the use of Allied air and twice impacted the Moung Soui operation, forcing the irregular forces into the hills and toward Xieng Dat.

⁹ CIA Daily Brief, 09/23/70. Laos: Government forces near the Plaine des Jarres are making some headway in what could be the last major effort to improve their defensive position before the rainy season ends.



Military Region Two. Arrow points to the direction of march toward the Mung Pot objective during the Ban Na offensive.

CIA Map, 09/23/70.

Mike Jarina returned to Twenty Alternate on the twentieth in Papa Foxtrot Gulf to conduct operations in the Site-72 and Ban Na areas. Working out of Phou So the following day, he supported the operation to reinforce the troops for another move toward Moung Soui.

Still strong despite privations, the enemy was intent on holding the Site-15 area. Four days after Mike worked the area, they attacked Vang Pao's newly arrived troops:

"On 24 September an estimated 300 North Vietnamese regulars overran three Lao guerrilla [recently established] outposts within three miles of Ban Na, an important hilltop position commanding the northern approaches to Vang Pao's headquarters at Long Tieng. Nearly one third of the 440 government defenders are still unaccounted for, although, it is expected most of them will eventually straggle back to government positions." ¹⁰

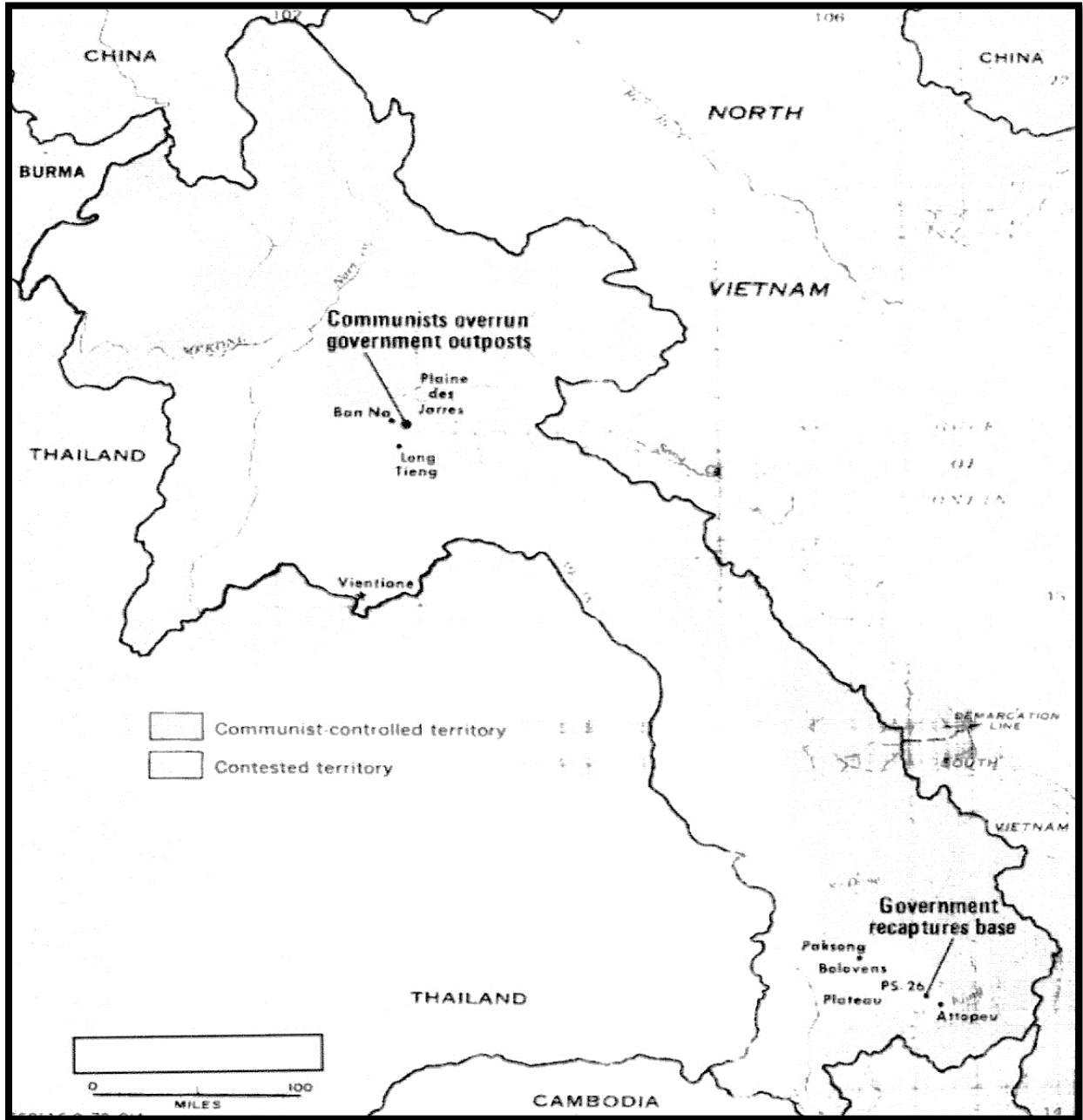
Jarina returned to the fray on the twenty-eighth in XW-PFJ. He worked in the Site-72 area supporting pads and searching for those who abandoned positions around Ban Na. He continued this activity on Wednesday.

On the last day of the month, he was assigned to shuttle troops from Bouam Long to Phou So in support of the Moung Soui operation.

UDORN

"I have been doing no flying since the 14th of the month and will probably do no more as we are over staffed with pilots now. I get pretty bored as there is nowhere to go with the roads in such bad shape." 09/28/70 Letter Home.

¹⁰ CIA Daily Brief, 09/26/70, Laos: The communists are counterattacking against government forces attempting to reoccupy key positions southwest of the Plaine des Jarres.



Area of contention in Military Region Two between the Plain of Jars and the Sam Tong-Long Tieng complex.
CIA Map, 09/26/70.

Soon after returning from Bangkok, courtesy of the daily airlift from the park, I was scheduled to attend a two-day Bell ground school at the Air America facility. Schools were conducted periodically on an ad hoc basis by the Training Department's Drexel Morgan. Most of us old-timers had been through so many schools over the years that we probably could have taught them ourselves, but the hours spent in the sessions provided a good review and helped maintain some standardization. Besides, Drex was a first-rate, entertaining teacher (and bar companion) who encouraged class participation to stimulate interest and prevent excessive boredom. In addition to the review, I always learned something from interesting sea-stories experienced contributors provided. However, satisfying, pertinent information and statistics regarding the Lycoming engine and FCU/governor operation and malfunctions were weak to nonexistent.

During breaks in classroom lectures, I was able to visit Phil Goddard in the CPH office. The heavy lift helicopter program desired by the Customer for challenging work not possible with our present inventory was still a priority, and management was soliciting individuals interested in such a program. Of course, because of union rules the list commenced with senior pilots. Along with information provided from Phil and Scratch, who was slated to head the program, I learned that a month-long CH-53 school was anticipated at the Sikorsky manufacturing plant at Bridgeport, Connecticut for pilots transferring to the new program. In addition to the ground school, twenty-five hours of flight training for each individual was envisioned.

Unless addressed, a pay cut for CH-53 participants was anticipated because of the decreased number of flight hours as opposed to our present monthly totals. Looking to the future and

employment after Air America, I never regretted upgrading to our newly acquired turbine engine machines, and was leaning toward participating in this one. Besides, looking forward to the future, heavy helicopter time looked good on an aviation resume. However, there was a caveat attached to the information. Mainly, everything was subject to change, for that was always the Company's option.

Captain Ellis Emery and his sizeable tribe lived a few houses down the street from us. Since Ellis owned a Volkswagen van and our larders were largely depleted, we decided to attempt the difficult trip to the airfield to obtain food, supplies, and mail. For hours, we attempted to negotiate the destroyed roads. Not far from the teacher's college, the main road was severed horizontally by a wide, deep ditch. Taxis and trucks with broken axles littered the cavity. Giving up on a direct route, we drove to the western portion of the field, only to find it largely impassible and the rear gate securely locked. Frustrated and fatigued, we finally returned home without any beans or bacon for the table. It was not devastating for my family, as we had the maid daily purchase fresh produce at the morning market.

MR-4 AND THE BOLOVENS

A CIA bulletin reported during mid-August:

"Along the eastern edge of the Bolovens Plateau, communist units continue to launch mortar attacks and probe government positions. For the time being, however, the communists appear satisfied to maintain their foothold on the Plateau. So far, the communists are not making extensive logistic use of the Se Kong River, strengthening earlier indications that the captures of

Attopeu and Saravane were made primarily for their political impact. ¹¹ ¹²

In the far south, the communists have yet to fulfill their propaganda threats against the towns along the road [Route-13] and river routes [Mekong] leading to Cambodia. Government patrols around Paksong [L-05] have found no evidence of major enemy forces. In the Kong Island [L-07] area, the communists seem to have dispersed the forces they reportedly assembled late last month..."

Emulating Vang Pao's late wet season offensive to reclaim lost territory deemed essential to preserving the Plateau, and as a prime launch site to conduct eastern road interdiction, a push to retake PS-26 on the rim of the Bolovens Plateau overlooking Attopeu was planned. To implement this goal, SGU battalions were identified, marshaled, and delivered from Luang Prabang (550 men supervised by Doug Swanson), Savannakhet (two of 300 men each advised by separate Case Officers including Don Courtney) and Long Tieng (600 under Jerry Daniels) by C-123 aircraft to the airstrip at PS-22. Some battalions were combat ready to march immediately, others required several months of training at the SGU facility. One battalion from Military Region Two was formed from ADC troops, originally from villages north of the Ban Ban Valley, evacuated in the wake of the Vietnamese sweep in that area.

As former "Smokejumpers," Don Courtney knew Jerry Daniels well. Moreover, both men had worked out of Takhli as loaders and kickers in the early days, and Don considered Jerry the best of the lot. However, they differed philosophically about many

¹¹ CIA Daily Bulletin, 08/15/70.

¹² As part of the USAF interdiction program to deny the use of waterway LOCs into Cambodia, in June several hundred mines were air dropped in the Se Kong.

things. Jerry was more of a Peace Corps type, a nation builder at Long Tieng (like former Vang Pao advisor Vint Lawrence). That is how the operation was dealt with there. In contrast, former Marine Corps officer Courtney demanded top performance from the mercenaries he hired. If not forthcoming, their services were terminated. Overall, Don worked in Military Region Four four times with Savannakhet units.

Finally, with all units considered ready for action, the PS-26 operation commenced toward the end of August. Lacking an overall mission commander, the five battalions were expected to coordinate operations, striking the enemy positions from all sides. However, composed of mixed ethnic units, and despite gross language and cultural differences, coordinated attacks were rare in the annals of RLG military history. Despite troops milling around, the first day began with some success, but the few motivated enemy remaining on top of the position were determined to hold.¹³

Ensuing heavy fire discouraged the inept Luang Prabang unit, which withdrew to PS-38. Other spooked and less than motivated government units, including the Savannakhet column, departed the field in pell-mell retreat.

GAUNTLET

Earlier plans were jointly shaped by Military Region Three and Military Region Four Agency units to commence a sizeable offensive against enemy LOCs and the 559 Transportation Group in southeastern Laos. After consideration in Washington the "coordinated" offensive was approved. Seeing merit in the operation, MACV Saigon concurred. The multi-faceted plan

¹³ Like the Spartan mother admonished her son before battle, "Do not return home without victory except on your shield!"

envisioned SGU irregulars operating in phases near Toumlan, in the Bang Hiang River area, toward Tchepone and Chavane. Code named Gauntlet, the Chavane movement was slated to begin 1 September; Tailwind followed almost simultaneously.

In Military Region Three, after SGU units cleared and seized terrain to the east and southeast, several government battalions would take to the field and advance on MOUNG PHINE and Tchepone. Commencing September into October, this operation would be called Gauntlet Two.

Because of adverse weather the Chavane raid failed to launch until 8 September. The multi-day lift began with four USAF Pony Express helicopters shuttling SGU troops to pre-selected landing zones west of the Chavane. On the 11th, Marine Corps CH-53s participated for the first time. Two days later one of five CH-3s was hit multiple times.

TAILWIND

While the "battle" for the eastern and southeastern Bolovens stagnated, the Agency, concerned that Vietnamese forces would continue to retain and reinforce strategic PS-26, eventually push government forces off the Plateau, and gain access to much of Military Region Four, deferred to the Studies and Observations Group (SOG) in South Vietnam to aid Gauntlet in a multi-purpose cross border operation. Noting a chance opportunity to strike at the enemy's rear, divert attention from the strike force moving in from the west, a reconnaissance in force insertion deep in to Laos near Chavane, a major enemy rear area, was planned. The operation was intended to gather scarce intelligence, deter enemy movement toward the Plateau, and also help create a diversion for another phase of the ongoing Military Region Three SGU road interdiction operation sixty miles to the north. Pre-authorized by Ambassador Godley, the

ambitious plan would far exceed any cross border penetration previously attempted. ¹⁴

After aerial reconnaissance located potential landing zones along Route-165 west of Chavane, the operation went forward.

During the morning of 11 September more than a hundred South Vietnamese highlanders, with several American Army types, boarded four USMC CH-53 helicopters and launched on the multi-day mission. Following tactical air preparation and continuous fire by the four escorting AH-1J Cobra gunships to mask the landing area from groundfire, a pathfinder team was inserted to secure the primary landing zone. After this phase was accomplished, the company was landed.

Before the units proceeded far toward their goal, they encountered a series of storage bunkers stretching for 1,500 yards. These contained a huge assortment of 122mm and 140mm rockets, 82mm mortar shells, 23mm AAA rounds, B-40 rockets, small arms ammunition, and other supplies. Equipped to deal with such caches, they laid charges that triggered explosions that continued for hours.

Hot engagements followed. With the aid of tactical air consisting of A-1s, F-4s, and AC-130 gunships supporting both operations during both the day and night, constantly moving west, the SOG unit prevailed. Casualties were incurred, but adverse weather prevented WIA extractions.

During the second day, the group observed numerous vehicles and troops moving along the Route-165 LOC. The radio operator alerted friendly air, which destroyed the trucks and many infantrymen. By then, with many wounded impeding progress, WIA

¹⁴ Raids on the Chavane area were attempted by Agency-directed SGU troops lifted by Air America and USAF assets from PS-22 during previous years, but none the Author participated in were very successful.

evacuation (med evac) was requested. It was successful, but at the cost of two CH-53s and reduction of the force.

The following day SOG invaders encountered a major base camp. Heavy air strikes and maneuver by fire enabled them to seize the facility. Besides trucks, parts, tons of rice, and a 120mm mortar, a large, deep bunker yielded numerous documents indicating the camp might be the primary Trail headquarters responsible for maintenance of Route-165. After collecting documents and planting charges on the vehicles, the group pushed further west.

Pursued by superior enemy forces, the remaining SOG force moved out at "high port," their speed determined by the wounded and captured items. CH-53 pilots were inbound to retrieve the WIAs, documents, and remaining souls. Extraction was tenuous. Although successful, it required much maneuvering and continuous tactical air strikes.

Despite the casualties and loss of assets, rear echelon SOG piques in Saigon were pleased. The diversion greatly aided success of the PS-26 Bolovens operation. Moreover, the captured papers revealed the most comprehensive intelligence ever discovered relating to the 559th Transportation Group, including supply shipments and codebooks.

Despite the success of the SOG mission, it marked SOG Prairie Fire troops' final large cross border incursion into Laos.

SUCCESS ON THE PLATEAU

After one Savannakhet colonel failed to jack up his men to perform the assigned mission, Colonel Touane Bouddhara and Don Courtney journeyed south to PS-38 to assess the situation and attempt to minimize the embarrassment. Eventually they fired both battalion commanders, replacing them with other more

motivated officers. In addition, troops were paid and fresh food provided. ¹⁵

Following preparatory bombing on the 22nd, by dawn of 23 September, the Savannakhet units, with Colonel Touane in command of one unit, seized the hilltop position and killed the few remaining "bad guys."

Following an inspiring pep talk by General Vang Pao, who took time out from the demanding Military Region Two work, the Long Tieng battalion moved up the southern slopes. Joining the Savannakhet units, the battalions captured the entire mountain by 25 September, placing PS-26 once again in government hands.

During the day, Don and Jerry Daniels worked at PS-38. Don had some interesting talks with Daniels, who normally alleged, *"It is their country and they will have to work it out."*

Don countered, *"I am paying their salaries and they will take that blankety-blankety hill."*

Don made allowances for Daniels. Although he had never served in the military like Don and lacked a structured service mentality, he was deemed the perfect man for Military Region Two.

The day after success was achieved, a CIA Bulletin reported:

"Government forces have made some progress in recovering lost ground in south Laos...Two battalions of government guerrillas, supported by heavy air strikes, yesterday recaptured PS-26, a Bolovens Plateau base overlooking the town of Attopeu. The base has come under heavy mortar fire by the enemy, however, and the guerrillas may have trouble holding it. PS-26 had been in enemy hands since April, and its permanent recapture would

¹⁵ Don Courtney considered Touane a very fine officer and the two men became good friends. Today, Touane lives in Wichita, Kansas.

facilitate guerrilla operations against enemy lines of communication in the Se Kong Valley." ¹⁶

From the southwest at PS-38, Don watched the battle unfold through field glasses. Once his troops had gained the position, the officers informed Don that the mountain could be held if water was provided to the troops. Eager to comply with the request, Don contacted Duncan Jewell, a short, retired former USMC field grade officer, for assistance. Jewell, a quiet, soft-spoken, silver-haired individual, who had worked on the Bolovens in past years, washed out a fifty-five-gallon fuel drum and filled it with water. Don went to Dunc's location and boarded an H-34 provided for the mission.

As portions of PS-26 were still experiencing mortar fire from outlying Vietnamese positions and a landing was not feasible, the red, sealed barrel was placed by the cabin door. A few small pebbles were placed under the container as chocks, while Don sat behind to further help stabilize the drum. The pilot conducted a hovering pass over the landing zone. A few feet above the terrain, with the help of the Flight Mechanic, Don pushed the 400-pound barrel out, crushing the pebbles. It landed intact in the soft dirt of a bomb crater. The pilot ascended and turned to depart just as mortar rounds began to impact the area. A few troops who were standing and cheering the drop were wounded. In spite of the casualties, Don was very proud of the H-34 crew.

Since Case Officers were not allowed to RON at PS-38, Don rotated to Pakse at the end of each day. He considered his time spent there a travesty. After Savannakhet troops took PS-26, there was no mention of this accomplishment in the after-action report. Taking umbrage to the major slight, he challenged the

¹⁶ CIA Daily Bulletin, 09/26/70. Laos: Government forces have made some progress in recovering lost ground in south Laos.

Pakse deputy, who pleaded that he was under duress and was obliged to write what he was told.

Another gripe was that Vientiane Chief of Station (COS) Larry Devlin was in attendance monitoring the situation. He played tennis in the afternoon, ate, and arrived at the office smelling funky for the daily operations meeting. Bone tired Case Officers arrived from the field about dark and went directly to the meeting. Depending on the material covered, Devlin normally dragged meetings out until 2200 hours or later. After this, the Case Officers departed and were usually unsuccessful in attempting to find something to eat and sufficient water to shower. Then they attempted to obtain sleep, as they had to be airborne before dawn for PS-38. It was not the same routine for station management, who arose at a decent hour and enjoyed a leisurely breakfast. ¹⁷

Larry Devlin was replaced by Hugh Tovar in September. ¹⁸ The new chief of station was charged with the ongoing mission to help sustain the Royal Lao Government and support the USG war effort in South Vietnam. Hugh was more prone to delegating tasks in contrast to Devlin, who had a tendency toward total control. Tovar had known AB-1 Chief Pat Landry since the Indonesia operation, and had developed an excellent working relationship

¹⁷ Don claimed that: *"actually Devlin was OK. He tried to be one of the boys, but didn't quite make it. COS/REMFs were not like you and me, just as a four-star general is not like you and me. And for the most part they weren't like you and me when they were lieutenants. You don't put on four stars unless you start planning to do exactly that shortly after, or before you're commissioned..."*

¹⁸ Perhaps because of the Tony Poe flap, but more likely a normal rotation.

with Ambassador Godley. ¹⁹

¹⁹ Segment Sources:

EW Knight Emails, 11/02/00, 11/05/00; Conboy, 244, 265, 277.
Bernard C. Nalty, *The War Against Trucks: Aerial Interdiction in Southern Laos 1968-1972*, Chapter 8, Cambodia, Commando Hunt 4 and Southwest Laos, 144-145.
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MACSOG Command History, 1970, USMACV/Command History 1970, Annex B, Operation Tailwind, 04/08/71.
07/21/70 CIA Intelligence Bulletin.
Mike Jarina Interviews.
Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 333.
Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 365, 367, 369.
Harry Blount, *CHECO: Air Operations in Northern Laos*, 14, 15.
9/23/70 CIA Bulletin, Laos.
Clay, *CHECO*, 09/14/70 Message to State from Ambassador Godley, 100-101, 116.
09/23/70, CIA Bulletin, Laos: Government forces near the Plain des Jarres are making some headway in what could be the last major effort to improve their defensive position before the rainy season ends.
Don Courtney Emails, 08/30/02, 08/27/02, 08/31/02, 09/11/02, 09/14/02; 08/21/70, 09/26/70, 03/10/14, 03/11/14 (Don claims he never heard the terms Gauntlet or Tailwind. He recalled the Military Region Three operations as Maeng Da.
CIA Bulletin, 09/26/70. Laos: The communists are counterattacking against government forces attempting to reoccupy key positions southwest of the Plain des Jarres.
CIA Bulletin, Laos: Fighting has dropped off considerably with the communist forces adopting a defensive posture.
CHECO, Folkman, 49.
Bill Leary September 1970 Notes.

Despite the month-long operation intended to recapture Moung Soui and Ban Na in Military Region Two, the degree of difficulty encountered, and intense enemy resistance, Vang Pao was even more firmly committed to securing these objectives, including the high ground bordering the southern Plain of Jars. Accomplishing these goals would greatly contribute to Long Tieng's security.

In order to activate these plans before the end of the wet season, a standard pincer movement was planned—"south from Moung Soui, north from Phou Long Mat, and northwest from Khang Kho." Although preparations for the operation were ongoing, large-scale movements were envisioned to commence in early October. Uncertain weather conditions rendered continuous tactical air power an intangible, but did not appreciably impede the ability of sturdy Meo troops to hump over difficult terrain and Air America helicopters to provide airlift.

Mike Jarina was still upcountry flying Papa Foxtrot Juliet in support of the Moung Soui operation. This included conducting troop movements between Bouam Long and Phou Cum to Pho So and Phou Fa until being recalled to Udorn.

SPECIAL MISSIONS

The reason for Mike's return was revealed on the second when John Fonburg, Ortillo, and I were assigned Papa Foxtrot Juliet for two special day missions out of Savannakhet. To save time and money, our Bell crews conducted the assignments concurrently.

Both sites were in remote areas. After positioning to the loading area at Whiskey 3 to board our team, we proceeded seventy miles northeast to WE693583, north of Route-12, Mugia

Pass, and four miles west of the border. With this accomplished we flew eighteen miles northwest to WE482912 for an exfiltration. I deadheaded both ways to and from Lima-39 and was back in Udorn by 1600 hours.

Saturday morning, we cranked up Papa Foxtrot Juliet for another mission, but this time to the far eastern portion of Military Region Two's Zone Steel. We delivered a team to VG022222, ten miles northeast of MOUNG MO (LS-182) and five miles north of historic MOUNG NGAI (LS-01). The landing zone was located three miles south of the DVR border and NAM MO that flowed into the Site-01 valley. It was my first insertion into this area and, although not briefed on the purpose, I surmised that the men were tasked to assess Vietnamese infiltration or to proceed north into North Vietnam to observe and gather information regarding new by-pass road construction leading to or across the border.

Following this long mission, before returning to Tango-08 for scheduled maintenance, we supported dozens of troop movements in and around KHANG KHO in preparation for the push northeast.

Juliet was still undergoing maintenance the following day when I arrived at the Air America facility for standby to launch upcountry. Since the machine required a part change and was not considered airworthy, I was released late in the morning.

Assigned to fly Papa Foxtrot Gulf, Kanach, and Jarina also remained in Udorn flying locally.

On the fifth, FONBURG, Dave Crowell, and I finally were able to ferry Juliet upcountry late to participate in movements to retake territory.

Mike also departed in PFG for The Alternate to support the ongoing effort to retake MOUNG SOUI. This involved shuttles from PHOU CUM and BOUAM LONG to PHOU SO and PHOU FA. He RON at Long

Tieng, as this activity, to include flights in and around Xieng Dat, continued until the seventh, when he returned to Udorn.

Moving south off Pho So toward the objective the troops, were temporarily halted by fierce enemy counterattacks.

On the morning of the sixth Fonburg, Crowell, and I, along with another crew, returned to the mission area of the third. Located at UG995205, a little west of the original landing zone, we retrieved the team, returning them to Phou Khao (LS-14) for debriefing. There was not sufficient time for the men to have penetrated the border and returned, so it was more likely they had encountered enemy or merely reconed the local area.

My double crew task completed, I deadheaded to T-08 on two Company aircraft, Porter N359F and C-123 40617.

Two days later, during mid-morning, I deadheaded in 13F with JJ McCauley and Flight Mechanic Casio to Thakhet for a three-Bell Special Mission. I had not flown with JJ since a March Special Mission. The two-hour roundtrip mission was conducted to WE6567, on the 6,100-foot Phou Honkai Plateau north northwest of Mugia Pass. The isolated site was located between the sites we had serviced on the second. While JJ remained in the field, I deadheaded home on Papa Foxtrot Juliet.

UDORN

While visiting the CPH office I learned that the HH-53 program had begun unraveling before it even had begun.

"I was a bit premature about predicting coming home to school. Evidently with the typical poor Air America planning a lack of funds exists for the parts involved in the proposed CH-53 program. It amounted to millions and I can't possibly see how they wouldn't take this into consideration before. The program will be put off until later or until some big daddy comes across

with a large bundle. It might be scrapped entirely and some more Bells might be forthcoming. You know the old saying about the right hand not knowing what the left hand is doing...We certainly don't have these problems on [our] lower echelon.

Well, sorry I won't be home, but one never knows. ¹

The rains seemed to have stopped and the roads are being repaired with dirt, like Plainfield in [the early] 1900s. Evidently, there was a little corruption and most of the money [allocated] for the repair work disappeared. So we are going to choke on our own dust for a long time...²

Did I tell you that a snake tried to bite Tuie [one evening while she was sitting on the front porch ledge talking to the maid?] She had a towel down by her leg [to prevent mosquito bites] and the snake, a baby king cobra, hit it and not her. She has problems with snakes. At the other house [on Soi Mahamit while talking to the landlady] she had a large one [slither] between her legs.

Maybe this [and other subjects] is why we are frequenting the temple. I go to the [wat] to see what goes on and snap a few pictures now and then. The Buddhist monk is making [many] predictions which I won't go into, as I can't believe this sort of thing yet. It seems to me that [these people] are like some doctors who try and keep their patients running to them all the time. I may be wrong, but this is my impression. The bonze [also] said that the whole family has bad luck. I have known this for a long time, but don't all families to some degree? "

10/09/70 Letter Home.

¹ We never received any factory fresh or bailed USAF CH-53 helicopters.

² Udorn became known as the "Red City" for the layers of reddish laterite dust caking everything, something readily apparent while airborne.

Dad later responded:

"Well, you did have us all agog and looking forward to your getting home again for a short visit. From day-to-day ideas and operations change and one often wonders if the right hand does know or even recognize the left.

Lay off the soothsayers and their predictions of good or evil. They are nothing but clunks who prey on the superstitions or the gullible...I think you people have pretty good luck so far and you should count up your blessings...I do wish you good luck against the fortune tellers and put your trust where it should be, in God." ³

10/15/70 Letter from Home.

MR-2

Although enemy units engaged and held up one column moving south toward Moung Soui, they failed to marshal sufficient resources to contain all Vang Pao's forces, especially those moving overland from the west.

By Sunday, the 11th, most of Moung Soui was back in government hands. Following the eventual enemy withdrawal from the area, clearing actions captured crew-served weapons to include mortar and recoilless rifles. This was in addition to the seizure of numerous small arms weapons and ammunition. By 23 October Lima-108 was declared secure.

CIA Intelligence reported:

"Successfully capping efforts that began in August, Vang Pao's irregulars this weekend captured the deserted town of Moung Soui and its nearby airstrip on the western edge of the

³ Despite his admonitions, my Father had little or no concept regarding tenets of the Buddhist religion or of the confusing mysteries of the East. Besides, in my line of work it was not a good idea to unduly tempt fate at any time.

Plaine des Jarres. No significant enemy resistance was encountered. Moung Soui, formerly a major Lao neutralist headquarters, has been under communist control since February 1970. It has more political than strategic importance."

To the east, since the eighth, the Khang Kho contingent had been marching north toward the "Nipple," a prominent protrusion into the foothills from the southern Plain of Jars. Then, as the Moung Soui area was being invested, the eastern battalions divided into two columns and slowly progressed into the Moung Pot valley toward that mountain and Moung Pang, both in close proximity to the Plain of Jars. Another unit skirted the southern edge of the Plain of Jars toward their intended objective at Phou Seu. Yet another battalion began moving north from elevated positions on Phou Long Mat to join the Moung Pot element.

A good news-bad news Agency intelligence report issued at the time stated:

"Parallel drives by three battalions of irregulars toward enemy-held territory between Ban Na and Moung Pot, southwest of the Plaine, also made some limited progress. For their part, the communists mounted a surprise attack behind government lines against Tha Tam Bleung [LS-72], an irregular support base less than seven miles from Vang Pao's headquarters complex at Long Tieng, inflicting fairly sizable casualties on its defenders."

As Moung Soui was changing hands and Vang Pao's men were moving toward targeted objectives near the southwestern Plain of Jars, I deadheaded to The Alternate in 204 model 96W, where I took control of 205 model Papa Foxtrot Juliet with Flight Mechanic Len Bevan and helped support Vang Pao's efforts to encircle and retake Ban Na and the surrounding territory.

With the enemy reacting vigorously around Site-72, and wounded evacuations anticipated by the Customer, Pat Colgan

arrived to join me on the twelfth to double crew Juliet. During a very active day moving vast amounts of sling loads and people, I logged fifty local landings. Sharing the workload, Pat logged the same amount. Recalled after a full day of flying, we landed at Udorn shortly after dark.

Along with other crews, Mike Jarina ferried Papa Foxtrot Gulf to Long Tieng on Tuesday. He was assigned to work Bouam Long and Phou Cum, which involved two Special Missions to the east, and delivery of an intelligence gathering team to Phou Khao for debriefing.

Wednesday morning, I boarded the daily Peppergrinder C-123K flight to Alternate. There Jon Stewart and I joined Flight Mechanic Bob Noble in 96W. ⁴ Along with Mike Jarina in Golf, we flew around the horn to Site-32 to conduct a Special Mission to the east. Vang Pao was not only planning to push the enemy back to the edges of the southern Plain of Jars before the dry season commenced; he also wanted information for an operation to pressure supply lines in and around the Ban Ban Valley and perhaps divert men from lower Military Region Two to that area.

The mission launched from Bouam Long twenty-four miles to the east across Routes-6 and 61 to UG719834, located two and a half miles northwest of the then unfriendly ville of Phu Se Bott (LS-82). Positioned between Ban Vieng (LS-89) and Phu Se Bott, the high ground provided security and the ability to move nine miles south to high vulnerable portions of Route-7.

After a quiet night in the valley, on the fifteenth, we supported local positions and the movement toward Ban Na. During

⁴ Stewart, a Saigon Huey pilot since 1966, had, like so many others, recently joined our program. I thought that I would be accorded IP pay with him, but it was denied. Jon remained with Air America until the bitter end. He later worked for Wayne Knight in Irian Jaya, Indonesia, and was killed in a Bell 412 accident at 14,000 feet.

the day, we conducted a Special Mission at TG886356, only two miles east of Site-15.

We were working in various areas to the north and west, where successful offensives were underway. Mike began working out of Moung Soui and moving troops in from Phou So and Bouam Long.

On Friday, while Vang Pao's troops tentatively moved into Ban Na, we performed two very long Special Missions that taxed our combat range. Staging from Bouam Long with a maximum fuel load, our two-aircraft contingent flew eighty-nine miles northeast across rugged, uncharted territory that displayed "relief data incomplete" on my map to VH632361. The landing zone was located close to the small river ville of Pou Boun Gium, five miles south of main Route-65 artery (designated Route-127 in North Vietnam until crossing the border) leading west to the important marshalling area at Sam Neua town. Only one mile from the Democratic Vietnamese Republic, the men were in position to move into the DVR, to spy on or harass the junction of Route-65 and 641 east of the major town of Moung Soi (L-60). ⁵

As troops consolidated defenses in and around the Ban Na airstrip, other units moved toward northern and surrounding high ground, discovering rice, ammunition, and other supply caches. In support, Jarina began delivering additional men and supplies to these forward positions from Padong.

I only flew Golf twenty minutes on Saturday before switching to 12F with Bob Hollisworth and Andy Anderson. Just before dark, I deadheaded to Udorn on C-123K 555, while

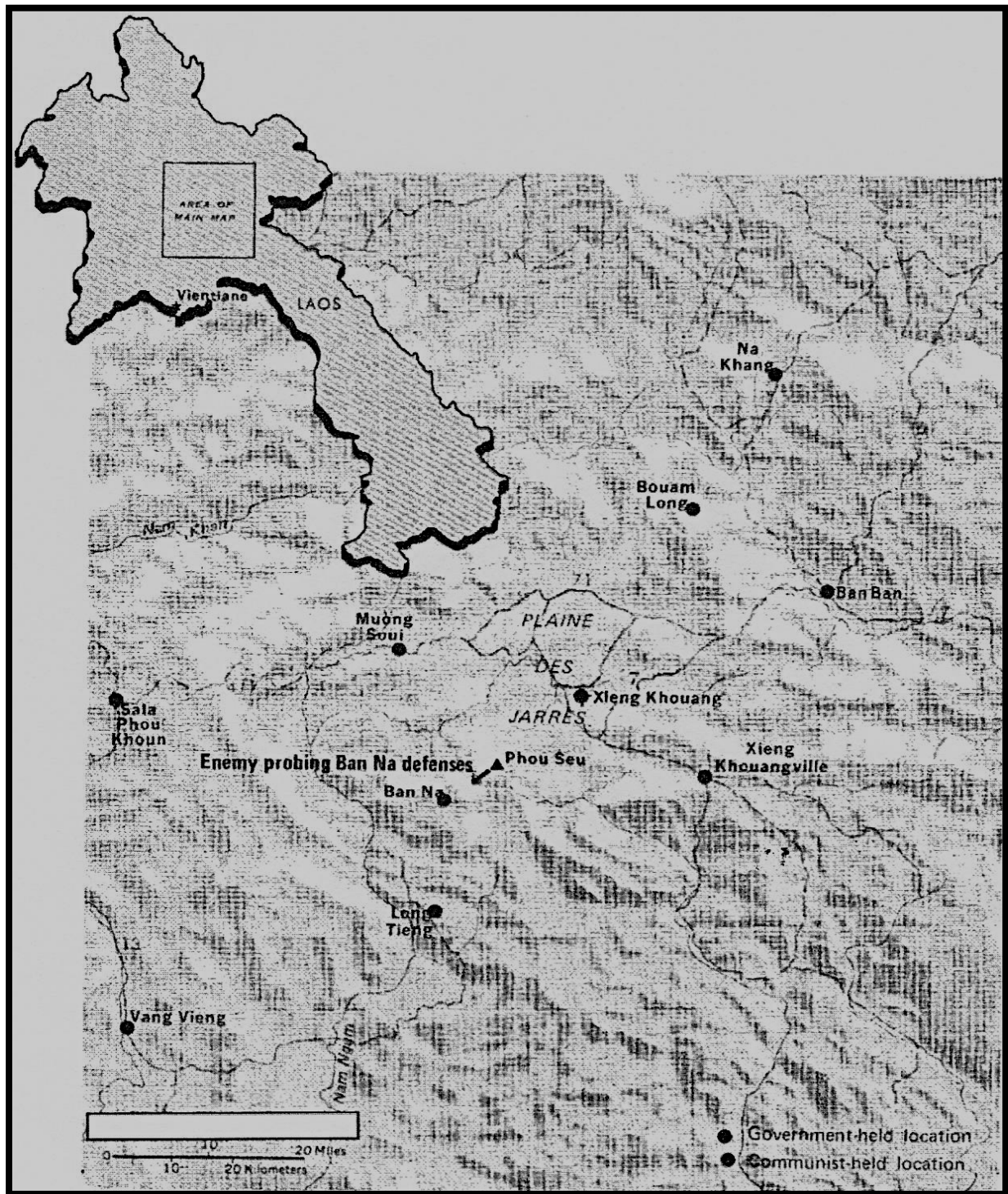
⁵ Within two years, this area would become the focus of a highly classified, ambitious Agency Special Project intelligence gathering operation.

Hollisworth, another transferee from Saigon, ferried the 204 to Udorn for a required maintenance inspection.

The next morning Andy and I returned to Long Tieng in 12F to conduct forty landings reinforcing troops on newly liberated high ground north of Sam Tong and at Ban Na. Invigorated by the gains, Vang Pao ordered a battalion to capture the lofty twin peaks of Phou Seu. Phou Seu was an especially favored location, as it not only provided commanding high ground to shell or direct air strikes on suspected enemy position, but to also observe a large portion of the southern Plain of Jars encompassing a 180-degree fan. Within a few days, the objective was taken, after which patrols began cautiously moving onto the Plain, perhaps with expectations of a repeat of 1969.

Following a quick breakfast on the nineteenth, I flew part of a fuel load (four landings) before being recalled. We arrived before lunch.

Weitz, Jarina, and Crowell flew to The Alternate in Papa Foxtrot Hotel. They were assigned to support efforts in the Moung Nham (LS-63) and Moung Moc (LS-46) areas. During the day, while approaching a landing zone, Charlie complained about the inability to move the cyclic aft in a normal fashion. With something obviously wrong with the hydraulic system, he landed. Dave removed the large metal plate in back of the cargo compartment which covered the transmission tunnel containing the hydraulic valves and plumbing. He discovered a fore and aft servo had been improperly installed. This was difficult to believe, for any hydraulic work required a static hydraulic ground mule check. Moreover, all quick-disconnect fittings were carefully color coded to enable workers to correctly hook up plumbing. Lastly, an FCF flight was required to check airworthiness prior to upcountry release.



The heights of strategic Phou Seu overlooked and commanded much of the southeastern Plain of Jars.

CIA Map, 11/13/70.

Dave conducted field repairs and they continued to march. The incident did nothing to instill a sense of well-being in Jarina, who was less than happy and harbored reservations about the Huey maintenance personnel.

The next morning the crew worked a Special Mission out of Bouam Long. They also worked to the west at Phou Vieng.

On the twenty-first, I conducted my first local proficiency check with Dick Elder in Papa Foxtrot Juliet. These training flights were required for so-called standardization, but really were unnecessary with senior personnel, who over many years had developed their own skills and flying techniques. Moreover, having flown with almost everyone at one time or another, the flights were academic, for I generally knew what to expect. It did provide a chance to stress the use of the check list and a critical review of emergency procedures.

WASHINGTON

On 15 October, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, a consummate world traveler who had visited the United States the previous year, arrived in New York City. During his seven-day visit, he met with U.S. government dignitaries in the Big Apple and addressed the United Nations General Assembly. After delivering a speech in Saint Louis, Missouri, and meeting with avid war antagonist, Senator William Fulbright, during which he stressed Laos' twenty-five-year struggle to remain free, he moved on to Washington, D.C for a visit with President Nixon.

During a forty-minute conversation in the Oval Office several pertinent subjects were discussed. Souvanna thanked Nixon for previously approving funding to defend both Sam Tong and Long Tieng at a critical time, for the loss of these sites would have presented a negative psychological effect on Laos. Since then, government forces had overcome the military problems

and resumed an offensive against the enemy. To his knowledge, the current offensive against the Plain of Jars and Ban Na was proceeding well.

The subject matter changed to reflect the Prime Minister's views regarding independent cease-fire proposals to North Vietnam.

Since Peking or Hanoi had not objected to contacts between the Royal Lao Government and Pathet Lao:

"...they were trying to separate the Laos question from the over-all Vietnamese question." They might accept "the Prime Minister's proposals to Hanoi of some two or three years ago...that if the North Vietnamese would withdraw their troops from Laos, the bombing would be stopped and the North Vietnamese would be allowed by the RLG to use the Ho Chi Minh Trail, over which the RLG had no control and which was the affair of the United States and the North Vietnamese."

As to the Cambodian equation, this new front *"had created some difficulties for the Lao, represented by the North Vietnamese offensive and the taking of Attopeu and Saravane. The North Vietnamese objective is to create a second supply route to Cambodia and South Vietnam, parallel to the Ho Chi Minh Trail."*

After stating the above, Souvanna added that:

"the destruction of the military potential in Cambodia and of the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong and the elimination of their main supply route via Sihanoukville had weakened the enemy's strength. The supplies destroyed in Cambodia can never be built up because the capacity of the Ho Chi Minh Trail is substantially less than of Sihanoukville."

The meeting ended on an upbeat note.

On the 22nd, the day the Prime Minister departed for home, CIA forwarded a memorandum speculating as to Hanoi's six-month intentions.

In the Agency's view, the conflict essentially remained the same:

"The Communists still believe that they have more staying power than their opponents, and they are gearing their efforts to a long, drawn out contest. It seems clear that they are determined to make the sacrifices required by the wider war in Indochina; there is some evidence that Hanoi has stepped up its recruitment efforts, and the southward flow of troops from North Vietnam began earlier than usual this year." ⁶

Although no tangible evidence was forthcoming regarding enemy plans, during the following six months, it was believed that they would expand and reinforce the logistic system in southern Laos, and attempt to re-establish a military threat in or near South Vietnam.

No *"significant increase in military activity was expected before or after U.S. Congressional elections."*

STO

Rick's medical records arrived from Doctor Scialabba's office. Armed with these and his additional history from our clinic and the USAF hospital, we journeyed to Bangkok on the night train. We stayed at the Dusit Thani Hotel, a new first-class hotel on Rama 4 Road, not far from Suriwongse Road. Offering a substantial discount for Air America employees that were comparable to those charged at the Montien, we decided to try the place. Very plush, smelling of fresh teakwood and other aromatic woods, the place was very interesting. Adding to the

⁶ In contrast to the previous year's numbers, estimates indicated that 20,000 enemy troops had been introduced into the Panhandle area since June, with destinations unclear.

ambiance, to the delight of infant children and adults, a small elephant was kept outside for viewing.

We taxied across town to Doctor Asawin's clinic for a final consultation prior to Rick's tonsillectomy. After perusing the medical information, he tended to lean toward the Stateside EEG examination. Disapproving of administering Dialantin for long periods because of the drug's proclivity to suppress white blood cell formation, and other negative side effects to tooth development, he recommended Rick only take Phenobarbital until he reached the age of six. The doctor assured us that the operation was the correct step to take, and that our son's health would measurably improve afterward.

The lengthy operation commenced on the 26th, with Rick's tonsils and adenoids being removed. In addition, his sinuses that were also considered a health problem, were washed out with a saline solution. Rick looked a mess when he was wheeled out of the operating room. Doctor Asawin assured us he was fine, although one tonsil was so badly infected that it came apart in the doctor's tweezers. Because he had to remain in the clinic overnight, Tuie elected to stay with him while I returned to the comfort of the Dusit Thani.

When I called Tuie in the morning I learned Rick was recovering and had taken some nourishment. He would probably be released later in the day. Since he would have to remain in Bangkok for about a week to monitor his condition and I still was slated for more upcountry work, I returned to Udorn the following day by myself.

MR-2 AND BAN NA

Since the recapture of Ban Na ten days previously, resupply efforts were conducted by both helicopter and fixed wing to both the sprawling site and to forward hilltop locations less than

two miles north. On the morning of the 27th Captain Ed Rudolfs and Terry Dunn were conducting operations from the site in Bell 204B N8513F. While on short final to the Site-15 strip, big Ed experienced an engine malfunction while close to the ground. Although a successful autorotation was effected, the downwash lifted a piece of barbed wire, damaging the tail rotor and a main rotor blade.

As site security was still considered shaky, an experienced field maintenance team and necessary parts were quickly flown to the strip from Udorn. By late afternoon a new engine and tail rotor had been installed, after which 13F was tested, and repositioned to Site 20A for additional repairs.

After the area around Site-15 was deemed semi-cleared by Meo guerrillas, considered an integral part of the Long Tieng defense line, both Vang Pao's and Agency plans revolved around holding the position in order to plug enemy incursion south toward Sam Tong and Long Tieng, and to form a sizeable fire support base (FSB) covering a 360 degrees radius to provide 105mm arty fire to much of the forward defense line as necessary. Against this end, regular Thai infantry battalion BI-15 and artillery unit BA-14 were installed at Ban Na, along with one SGU unit. ⁷ After gun pits, bunkers, trenches, foxholes, drop zones, and helicopter landing zones were largely completed, the formidable 105mm artillery base, known as Puncher, became active.

In Washington, a review of the Thai Special Guerrilla Units in northern and southern Laos was conducted by the Special Actions Group. It was determined that the activities should be

⁷ Some Meo had been previously trained in heavy howitzer artillery procedures, but were not considered as technically proficient as the Thai army units.

justified to Congress because they were a continuation of established programs and protected U.S. military in South Vietnam.

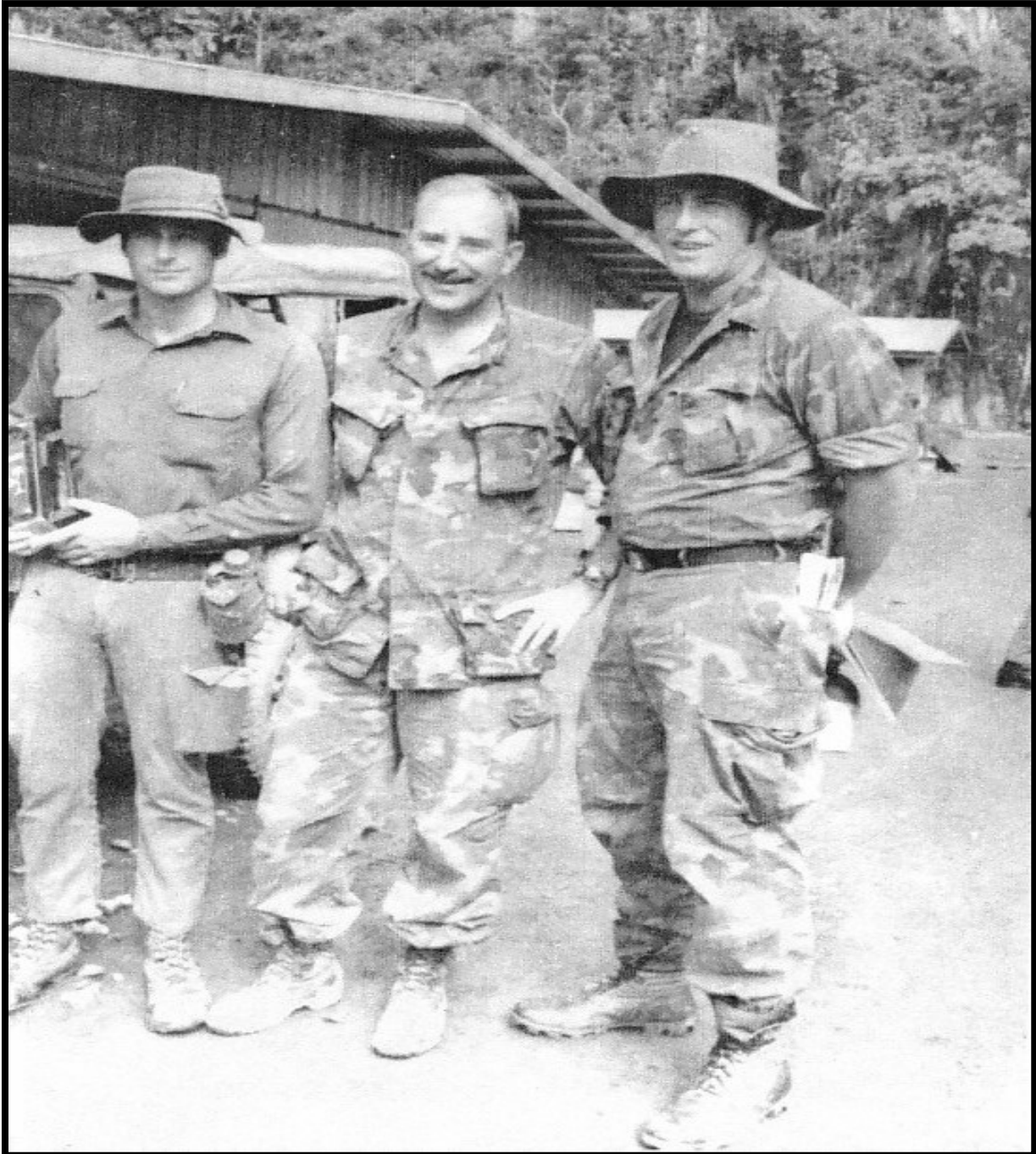
Pending superiors' sanction, it was agreed to replace regular Thai Army units staged around Long Tieng with less effective SGU troops. Recommendations to proceed for both political and budgetary consideration moved up channels and were forwarded to Henry Kissinger. By the end of November, Kissinger agreed that:

"Recruitment and training of the SGU men should proceed and their effectiveness be reevaluated toward the end of March 1971."

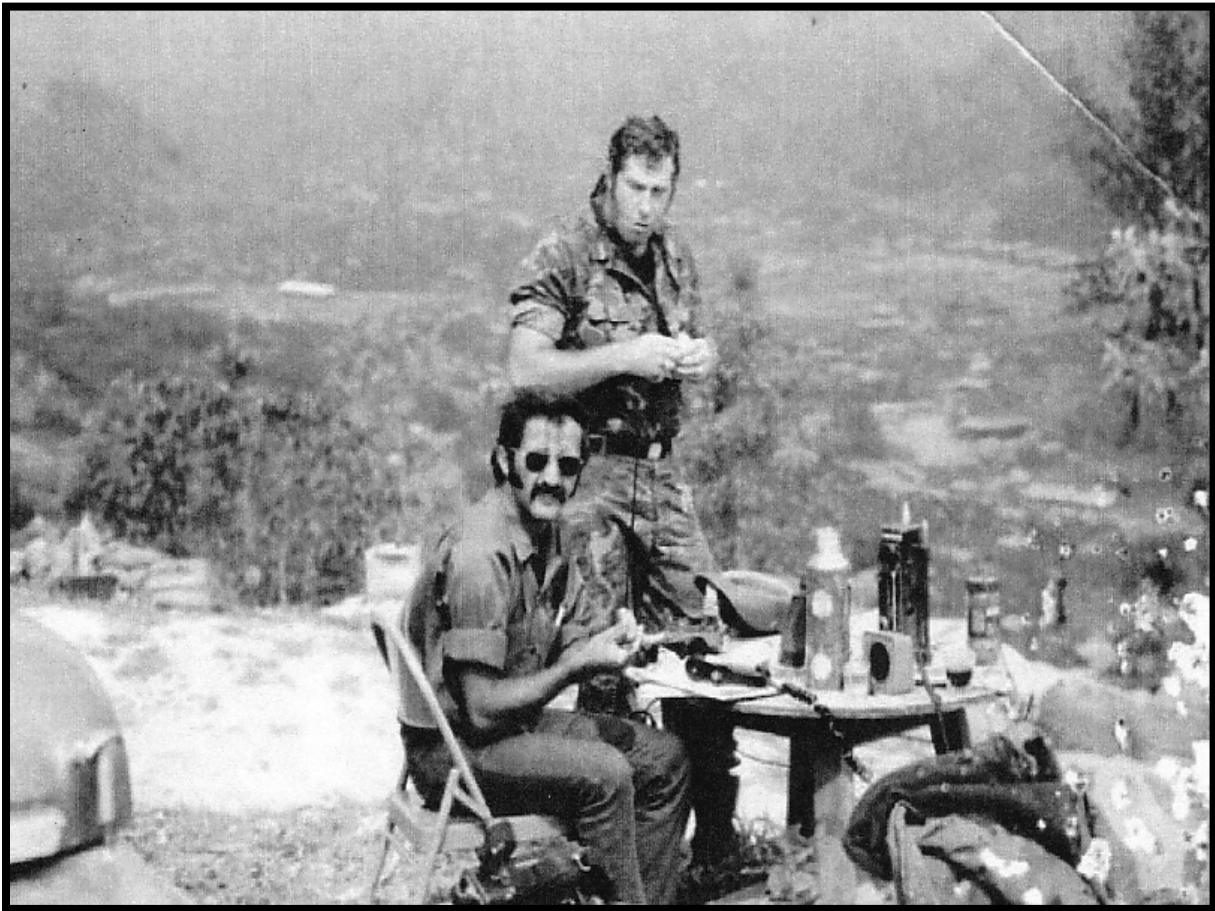
Following Vang Pao's latest gains, out of ammunition and other supplies required to wage war, major Vietnamese units began a phased withdrawal toward the center of the Plain of Jars to establish a defense line, refit, and prepare for future offensives.

NEW BLOOD

During mid-October 1970 a sizeable influx of young Agency Case Officers arrived at Long Tieng to replace those whose tours were complete, or who were being reassigned. Some new Case Officers included: Jim Assuras (Greek), George O'Dell (Digger), David Campbell (Red Coat), and George Bacon (Kayak). Vietnam veterans from various services, all four of the men had undergone a year of training at the Agency administered "Farm" at Camp Peary, Virginia. One of their instructors at the base was Customer Howie Freeman on sabbatical from Southeast Asia, who would join the graduates and return to work at The Alternate. After "snapping in," over a period of time the men would assume separate tasks: Former helicopter pilot, Greek was assigned Air Operations duties. This allowed "Tiny," Jim McElroy



Agency Case Officers advising Thai infantry George Bacon-Kayak, George O'Dell-Digger, and Tom Matthews-Ringo (who came to Long Tieng later).
Parker, Battle for Skyline Ridge, 65.



"Greek" (Jim Assuras) sitting, and Ringo having lunch on high ground south of the Long Tieng Valley.

Parker Collection, 64.

a former air operations officer, to transition to a field Case Officer.

About the same time as the men's arrival, in addition to the COS Vientiane exchange, other changes were being effected. Chief of Station Long Tieng, Vince Shields, a younger man who I knew quite well from his other assignments, was being replaced by former USMC veteran Dick Johnson, with Howie Freeman as his deputy. (Shields later rotated to Pakse.)

Of all the new arrivals, young Bacon was the most unique individual. After attending Georgetown University for two years, George "Kayak" Bacon volunteered for U.S. Army Special Forces and trained as a medic. He worked with the top secret MACVSOG (Studies and Observation Group) in the northern and central SOG operational area. Many times, Sergeant Bacon was the first man off a helicopter and the last to board after a mission. One participant recalled a Vietnamese Kingbee-manned H-34 waiting for the last person to board. Of course, this was Bacon, who was dashing and shooting at high port, as the enemy pursued him.

Considered a loner, the highly intelligent man spoke four languages. Instead of drinking between assignments, like his peers did, Bacon read anything available, ranging from dull stock financial reports to westerns.⁸ He was eventually wounded by AK-47 fire in South Vietnam.

When his service obligation was complete, George reenrolled in college. Before long he was recruited by the Agency when the requirement for Case Officers dominated Agency policy for Laos.

Bacon released Burr Smith for other duties, and he was assigned to advise Long Tieng Thai units. This included liaison with the Thai artillery group installed at Ban Na. Named Puncher

⁸ Bob Noble Email, 04/01/15. Bob, a crew chief and gunner on UH-34D helicopters, knew and worked with Bacon in the MACVSOG unit in South Vietnam. He considered George a top Special Forces operative.



Former U.S. Army Special Forces Major Case Officer Burr Smith (Mister Clean) towering over his Thai counterparts on a portion of western Skyline Ridge. Vang Pao stands second to the right of Smith. DHEP is to Vang Pao's right.

Parker Collection, 53.

fire support base (FSB), it was then incumbent for any of us working the Site-15 area to call the site FAGs, Hilltop and Home Run, to determine the current situation and status of outgoing fire, and request that they shut the tubes down if flying into northern landing pads. To some degree, over time I would closely interface with these new individuals, a few more than others.

On the 29th, I departed upcountry on Triple Nickel. It was a wasted effort. Since 13F was still grounded (AGP), I was recalled and returned home on Jolly Green 54524.

The next day I deadheaded to The Alternate with Charlie Weitz and Dave Crowell on Papa Foxtrot Gulf. Sharing the work load with Charlie, I conducted ten landings supporting area defensive positions. Informed to RTB that evening, I was again relegated to deadhead status.

On Saturday, the final day of the month, Scratch Kanach, Ben Shaffer, and I performed a lengthy proficiency session in 1196W. In the process, which included multiple landings, we attempted to standardize each other, improving our techniques to comply with training department authorized maneuvers. We had talked about doing this previously, and at the end of the ride, I felt that I had learned a lot more regarding conducting Bell

proficiency rides with established line Captains. ⁹

⁹Segment Sources:

Harry Blout, *CHECO*, 15.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 265-266.

Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 337.

Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 385.

Mike Jarina Interviews.

10/12/70 CIA Bulletin, Laos: Government forces have registered gains in the north.

FRUS #52, 10/16/70, Summary of Conclusions of a Meeting of the Washington Special Actions Group: Cambodia.

FRUS, #56, 10/21/70, Memorandum for the President's File by the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig.

FRUS, #59, 10/22/70, Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, *Hanoi's Short-Term Intentions*.

James Parker, 8.

Bill Leary October 1970, 1971 Notes, this included an interview from George "Digger" O'Dell and an article in *Merc* by Malon and Brown.

Wayne Knight Email, 11/05/00.

"A Communist victory in north Laos [against Vang Pao's forces] could cause the Laotian government to fall or at least to negotiate political arrangements in accord with Communist demands, including an end to U.S. air action over Laos."

Director of Central Intelligence Helms Report on Southeast Asia.

Although Vang Pao's weary and depleted forces achieved provisional gains during the wet season, substantial enemy numbers were firmly entrenched in forward positions on the central Plain of Jars, where they could quickly maneuver and wreak severe damage on government forces. Moreover, the massive air support government that friendly troops had come to rely on to save Long Tieng and force the enemy away from their defensive positions, was no longer forthcoming, as requirements shifted to more important trail interdiction.

Vietnamese engineering units, with the assistance of conscripted labor, had repaired, or were in the process of constructing, alternate roads to funnel supplies and men into the Plain of Jars. Attempting to avoid exclusive use of the heavily interdicted Route-7, bypasses like Route-73 were built. Also under construction was Route-723, an artery paralleling Route-7 from the distinctive "Fish's Mouth" (as seen on the map) on the border, and dog-legging southwest through Mounng Ngan (LS-236). Assuming a new identity of Route-72, the road eventually connected to Route-4 in the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley area and

continued west toward the PDJ. By the end of November, most of the logistic road network leading to the Plain was intact. ¹

"Defending Long Tieng required a lot of resources, especially in the dry season. While Skyline Ridge had to be defended the only effective defense was forward of Skyline which required more troops, more supplies [and so forth]." ²

Allowing for plus and minuses, the first of November was traditionally considered the beginning of the annual dry season. For years, the first two months of the so-called dry season were employed by the enemy to position supplies forward to support offensives. This year, however, bulging caches were already hidden and stockpiled on the Plain of Jars to supply the attackers.

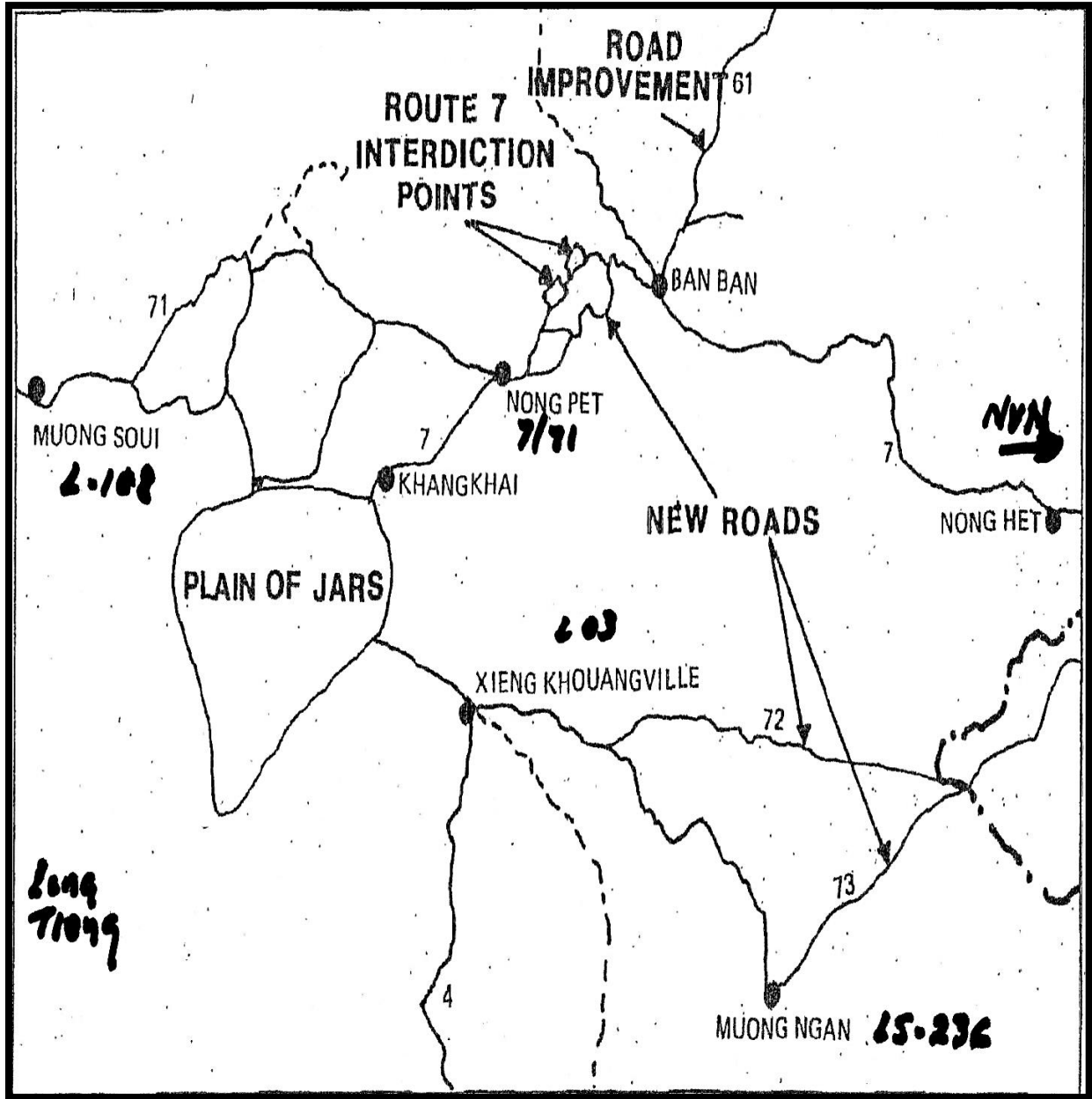
The enemy was close to Vang Pao's defenses, and ready to strike from the southern Plain of Jars. This soon became abundantly clear, for early on the morning of the first, about a hundred 105mm artillery rounds were discharged at friendly positions on Phou Seu's heights. This was followed by battalion-sized assaults that ejected government troops from the commanding elevations. Simultaneously, Thai troops at Ban Na came under artillery and 120mm mortar bombardment.

An Agency analysis aptly described the situation:

"In the Ban Na area, elements of the NVA 148th Regiment are active on a daily basis chipping away at government outposts and probing for weaknesses in the defense perimeter. Since retaking Phou Seu mountain on 1 November, enemy forces have concentrated

¹ For ease of identification, U.S. military planners accorded route numbers to trails and roads in Laos that were normally in contrast to those on Vietnamese maps.

² Former Chief of Unit Dick Johnson's letter to Professor Bill Leary, 09/17/93.



November enemy arteries leading to the Plain of Jars. "Fishes Mouth"- the dotted line protrusion into Laos to the lower right of the map. Anthony.

on other key terrain features to the west of Ban Na, employing artillery fire followed by company-sized ground attacks.

Farther north, neutralist units occupying Moung Soui have reported that communist forces have become increasingly active [since the 10th]. On the basis of past performance, the neutralists are unlikely to contest seriously an enemy attack.

The communist campaign west of the Plaine so far appears to be a step-by-step effort to reduce the government's presence in this region, rather than an all-out counteroffensive." ³

Within two weeks, an important elevated defensive site north of Site-15, manned by SGU troops, was challenged and lost. On the 15th, an irregular unit counterattack regained the position. Smacking of musical mountains, the following day it was again lost. Probes three days later discovered that the enemy had abandoned the site.

After consolidating victory at Phou Seu, by month's end the enemy began to fortify the mountain.

POLITICAL PRONOSTICATORS

At the beginning of the dry season Ambassador Godley weighed in on military strategies for each region in Laos:

"As in previous years our main concern is to create a flexible defense which will economize the RLG's limited forces and firepower and make the most effective possible use of the Military Regions only advantages the RLG possesses in defending itself against a powerful aggressor--mobility and Tac Air."

Not long after Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Richard Helms returned from a fact-finding trip to Southeast

³ CIA Bulletin, 11/13/70. Laos: North Vietnamese forces are continuing to challenge government control of recently won positions west of the Plaine des Jarres.

Asia, a comprehensive report was generated and forwarded to interested parties, to include President Nixon:

"Southeast Asian political and military leaders were unanimous in their belief that the outcome of the struggle with Hanoi will basically determine the political shape of Indochina and the rest of mainland Southeast Asia during the next decade."

The report continued:

"...aside from negotiations, Hanoi badly needs a significant, tangible victory for its effect on troop and party morale...a majority believe that it will be in Laos or Cambodia...most serious problems are likely to develop in north Laos...It is our weakest link.

At present, Hanoi is making a major effort to refurbish its logistical bases in south Laos and Cambodia...if it fails, another year will have been gained for the non-Communist governments to solidify their position.

It is essential that Thai Artillery and troops remain in the north, and that the present level of U.S. combat air support be continued there.

...events over the next nine months or so will critical and perhaps decisive bearing on the outcome of the struggle."

One of the recipients of the report was Henry Kissinger, who indicated:

"...it is clearly in our interest to prevent a large volume of supplies from moving through south Laos and to be prepared for a military push should the Communists attempt one." ⁴

Because of a realistic perceived weakness in General Vang Pao's position in relation to previous years, and of ongoing

⁴ Perhaps Richard Helm's trip solidified interest in the ARVN cross border operation (Lam Son) that would transpire early in 1971 to attack Route-9 and Tchepone.

overt and covert negotiations with North Vietnamese leaders in Paris, Washington planners proposed reducing or eliminating aggressive RLG troop movements within Military Region Two. By the third week in November, a process of de-escalation was forwarded to Ambassador Godley for his opinion:

"...The Vientiane country team does not believe that Hanoi would be encouraged to lower the level of hostilities in north Laos if we forced the RLG forces to limit their mobility and form a defensive ring around Long Tieng.

We believe on the contrary that the communist adversary will negotiate only when the cost of achieving his objectives by military means is higher than he is willing to pay.

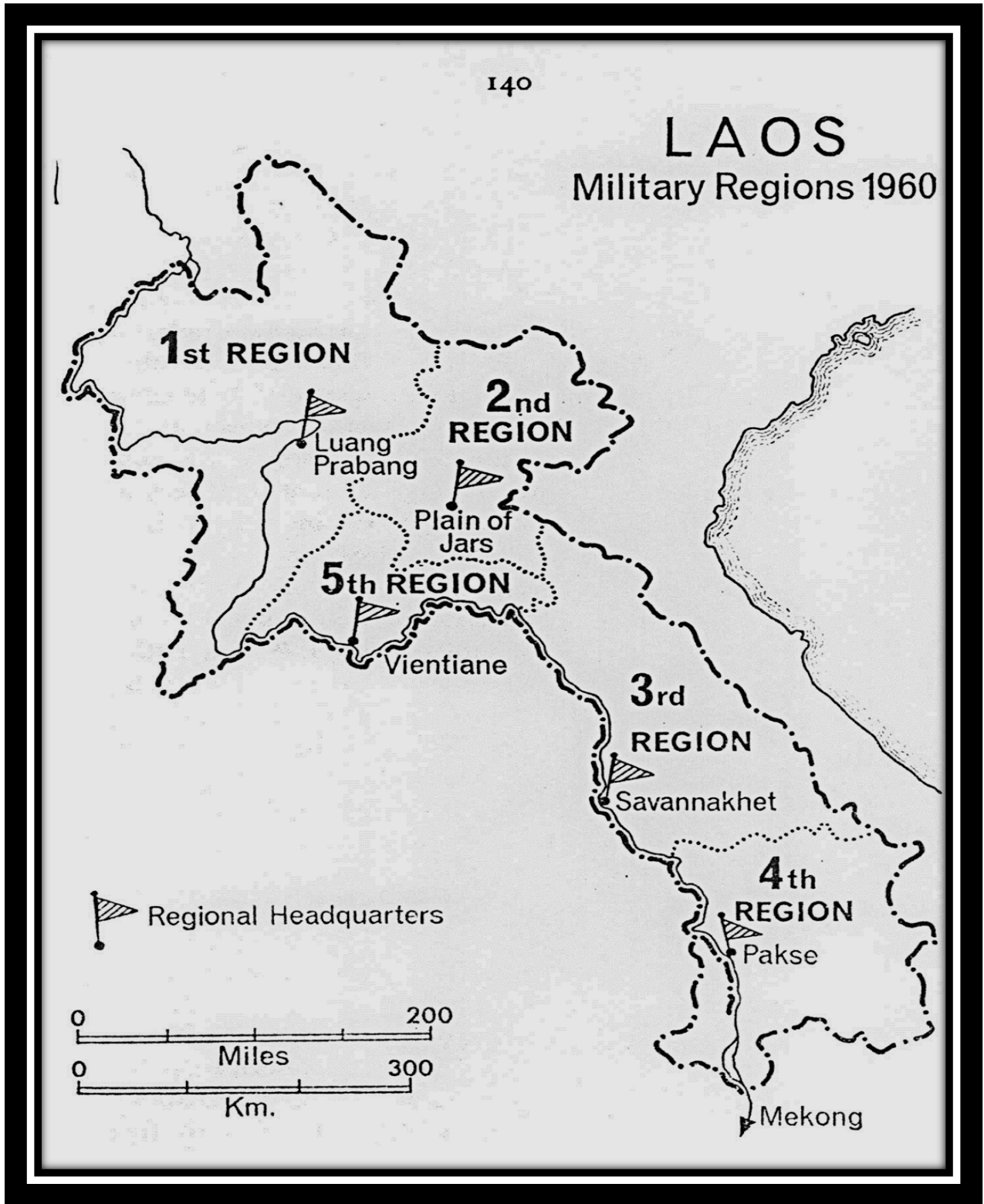
Conversely, we are convinced that he will exploit mercilessly any sign of military weakness or indecision on the part of friendly forces. Particularly at the present time when there is an increasing possibility that talks between the Lao factions will actually occur, it is extremely important to help the Souvanna government to work from a position that has not been completely whittled away by communist military actions.

Souvanna is an excellent negotiator but whatever slight chance he has to reach a viable compromise with the communists would be utterly destroyed in RLG military forces were pushed out of Long Tieng."

WHOOPS

I was assigned to conduct a proficiency check in Papa Foxtrot Juliet with Frenchy Smith on the first, and then to proceed to The Alternate, work, and RON.

Because of its availability and lack of air activity that sometimes plagued us at the Udorn airport, we used a large enclosed area eighteen miles south at the Ramasuan radio



Relatively unchanged Military Regions (MR) in Laos.

intercept station to perform the maneuvers. The only down side to using this area was the lack of fire-fighting equipment.

We completed most of the standard and emergency maneuvers. While on the ground, in preparation for a hydraulics off 360-degree circuit, I instructed Frenchy to switch into manual fuel mode. As I considered Frenchy a seasoned, accomplished, senior pilot, and assumed that he was familiar with the procedure, I failed to vocalize the process or closely monitor his movements. For some reason, not under pressure, but perhaps rushing to complete the check ride, he did not retard the throttle to flight idle and flipped the lever directly into manual. Then, immediately recognizing his error, he switched back to the automatic fuel control mode. His quick reflexes prevented an engine over temperature, and there was no change in engine performance. He looked at me with a wry grin on his face, indicating that he had blundered. Acknowledging this, I was amazed and relieved, but the incident was embarrassing to both of us, particularly me. I should have been monitoring the throttle and the switch to prevent just such an occurrence, as I would have done with a less experienced pilot. As a non-schooled IP, I was still learning what could happen on check rides during periods of overconfidence and inattention.

As payback for his boo-boo, later, while departing the field for Udorn, I cut the gun (reduced the throttle to idle) and announced a simulated engine failure. Since we were still fairly low and headed for the tall anchor fence, I would not have initiated this emergency with a less accomplished pilot. However, I had flown upcountry with Frenchy, viewed his technique, and his reputation was such that I believed he could handle the autorotation. Besides, I wanted to see if he was as good as touted. Surprised that I would do this, he lowered the collective, turned left, and completed the autorotation to the

ground. It was beautiful, something I am not sure that I could have accomplished without considerable practice. As we prepared to RTB, French rightly cursed me for pulling such an unorthodox maneuver on him.

After refueling, Smith, Ortillo, and I proceeded late to Long Tieng. We still managed to fly an afternoon of local supply runs to surrounding defensive positions. Frenchy and I shared thirty landings.

While Frenchy transferred to another Bell on Monday, I worked a full day by myself before returning late at Udorn with forty-five landings under my belt.

TCHEPONE

For most of the summer, several SGU battalions had been maneuvering in the field east of Savannakhet patrolling, gathering intelligence, and achieving varying degrees of tactical success. As the monsoon season waned, a final ambitious operation was planned before the enemy dry season machine could coalesce and manifest in serious offensives.

The operational plan involved a six-battalion, 1,600-man participation. Divided in half, one force would move from Moung Phalane (L-61) southeast to Moung Phine, while another would march east from Moung Phalane toward Tchepone, a major Trail logistics hub accommodating Base Area 604 and "Binh Tram 33, the principal logistics command for the war effort in Cambodia and South Vietnam." Savannakhet unit did not seriously harbor designs to capture either Moung Phine or Tchepone; they only intended for the battalions to create a maximum of trouble for the enemy. Supplied by air, their mission involved rapidly pushing as far as possible into enemy territory, mining major LOC intersections and roads, ambushing vehicles, and generating targets for RLAFF air strikes.

The operation, known as Gauntlet Two, kicked off during the third week of October. Within a week, the Tchepone-bound unit moved over thirty miles east to the base of Phou Katon, the southern portion of a large mountain mass overlooking the Tchepone Valley. Discovering and destroying much of an enemy motor pool, by month's end part of the task force had moved further east and arrived at a point close to the Route-9/914 Tchepone crossroads.

On 1 November, the enemy reacted vigorously by ambushing and attacking a portion of a unit in the hills of Phou Katon. Enemy momentum continued the next day, with friendly air failing to curtail the accelerating assault. By Tuesday, additional AAA was brought forward on accessible roads and trails, effectively denying RLAf air support.

WHEW!

When I arrived in Udorn on the second and checked the flight schedule, I noted that Pat Colgan, Ortillo, and I were slated to crew Fox Juliet. Billy Pearson and Mike Jarina in Papa Foxtrot Hotel would also proceed to Thakhet with us in the morning. Of late, Military Region Three assignments triggered a primary assumption: Special Missions, involving varying degrees of difficulty and hazards.

We arrived mid-morning at L-40 for a two-aircraft mission into the Mugia Pass area. After delivering a team and supplies to the remote landing zone, we moved down to Savannakhet.

"We have been having a little maintenance trouble lately and I naturally have gotten my share. Only one bothered me as I was in a bad area with nowhere to go and enemy in abundance. The emergency feature [manual fuel control] worked and I was able to fly the aircraft eighty miles back to base, Very exciting!..."

11/13/70 Letter Home.

The Lima-39 Customer briefed us regarding the bitter fighting occurring eighty-four miles to the northeast. A unit had incurred thirty-nine wounded at XD143474 in the wooded hills of Phou Katon. Therefore, a joint armada consisting of two Bells and several H-34s was tasked to conduct an emergency extraction of these men. Unknown to me at the time, the area had been used by friendly troops during previous operations.

As briefed, the mission presented an unspecified and possibly dangerous nature, for the evolving situation was tenuous. Moreover, the SGU unit was reputedly surrounded by an undisclosed number of enemy troops. RLAF or American air could not respond, as copious AAA guns had been moved into the area.

Much faster than our counterparts, Billy and I decided to precede the H-34 pilots into the landing zone. Billy P was senior to me, therefore, he would lead. I would constitute the SAR ship and might also retrieve wounded pending a quiescent situation and successful resolution.

The map revealed the friendly position toward the south end of a northwest-southeast oriented three mountain complex, eight miles at its widest point and sixteen miles long. Phou Ali formed the northern most bench mark elevation,⁵ with Phu Lom in the center and Phou Katon south. Deep in "Indian Country," the friendly position was eight miles west of the Tchepone 9/914 road junction, and fourteen miles north of Moung Phine, where the second task force twiddled its thumbs, while accomplishing as little as possible.

Fortunately, the weather was good. We crossed Route-23 at 8,000 above ground level (AGL) without incident and proceeded eastbound toward the high point on Phu Lom, used previously as a checkpoint while conducting deeper road watch missions.

⁵ Bench mark: The estimated or an actual elevation of a mountain top.

We felt somewhat confident at this stage of the operation; we would be fairly safe flying over the heavily forested hill mass, which would provide a masking buffer from groundfire on enemy roads to the east.

Looking north from my altitude, no trees, no jungle, or any greenery were seen for miles in the distance. Instead, white, churned up terrain from continuous Arc Light strikes had drastically altered the landscape. From my vantage point I had a clear view of the dreaded enemy Route-911 LOC, and most of the heavily bombed road networks on all sides of the mountain.

At UMT grid coordinates XD0555, with Billy P already headed southeast toward the landing zone, I suddenly heard a series of loud explosions outside the aircraft and felt Juliet shudder violently. Believing that we were incurring AAA fire, I momentarily glanced outside for evidence of this and attempted to mentally process my next move. No black flack puffs were observed, so my attention next shifted to the cockpit instrument console panel for evidence of problems.

The explosions continued. Then the Bell's nose began yawing right and left with the tachometer needles splitting and oscillating ten percent. Obviously, we were encountering severe engine compressor stalls unlike any I previously experienced. It appeared, despite the emphasis maintenance accorded repair and changing FCUs and governors, we were still subject to component problems. Regardless of the problem, it was imperative that I initiate immediate emergency action. Whatever form it took had to be right for our survival.

Still at altitude, but descending fast, I was afforded few options and had only seconds to analyze the situation and act. If the engine continued to operate, I could possibly land with some power on unfriendly roads to the east. If not, I could attempt to autorotate and hope for the best. Another more

dubious option was to conduct a forced landing into the forested slopes below. Because of the implications, neither option was too palatable, for the force of gravity ruled the day. Certainly, depending on the configuration of the aircraft at touchdown, at the very least injury, death, or capture awaited us below. A third and correct option for the situation was to conduct an unwritten, but word-of-mouth emergency procedure for compressor stalls. Sometimes reducing power would alleviate or eliminate the condition, but thus far this method had not worked. Therefore, I lowered the collective to the full down position, retarded the throttle to flight idle, and instructed Pat to switch into the manual fuel control mode.

Altitude was our savior that day. Therefore, I took a small amount of time conducting the emergency procedure. While assessing engine performance, I slowly rolled the throttle on, increasing power to normal operating parameters. No immediate problem was noted--no more stalls. Unlike the immediate emergency I faced on takeoff from Site-72, this situation allowed me an abbreviated opportunity to think and plan ahead.

By the time I reached operating RPM without any further stalls, we had lost 1,000 feet. This certainly was not what we had practiced during controlled proficiency checks, but it was realism. We were still two thousand feet above the terrain. I could have wrapped the power on, thus conserving altitude, but chose this slower method so as not to exacerbate a relatively unknown engine condition by over-tempering and further damaging the engine. Colgan remained quiet throughout the maneuver, but later remarked on the way out of the zone that he was waiting for me to initiate action, and was about to independently take action. I am glad he chose not to do so, for it would have greatly compounded our problems.

While turning west, I radioed my problem to Pearson, emphasizing the point that I would not be able to provide him SAR cover. Bill had heard my brand of Bull Sierra before, and had told me in no uncertain terms that I always said I was not going to do something, and then went ahead and did it. This was the case earlier in the year during the Vang Pao ring incident on the Plain of Jars. Perhaps he believed I was crying wolf, for his laconic reply made me wonder if he understood or truly appreciated our current predicament. I did not have time to get involved in a pissing contest. We were eighty miles from Savannakhet, and nursing a sick engine that might quit at any time.

Despite the special guerrilla unit radio operator screaming for extraction, heavy groundfire prevented Bill from landing at the landing zone. As I proceeded west at a lower cruise power setting than normal, he joined loosely on me. At that point, all engine instruments were normal, displaying no evidence of a problem. While Pat and I considered our new options, we both scanned our flight path for likely forced landing areas should that become necessary.

Clearing the mountains and foothills, the terrain flattened, with scrub brush adorning the landscape. When Route-9 became visible, I intersected and paralleled the distinctive black trace. Then, feeling a little more relaxed in a more "secure area," but with many miles left to go, I began ruminating about the numerous distressing things that could happen. The eight to ten violent stalls occurring during a few seconds certainly must have severely damaged the compressor power wheels.

I had called ahead alerting the tower and Customer of our plight and to take whatever preparations deemed necessary. After what seemed like an eternity, we arrived high over the Lima-39

airstrip, clearing myself, and ensuring a long-paved runway should the engine fail on descent.

Still in the manual fuel mode when I reduced power, the torque needle began oscillating alarmingly. There were no more stalls, but I had serious concerns about what would happen when I conducted a power on landing. My anxiety was unfounded. During my tenth and most cautious landing of the day, the engine functioned well throughout descent and landing. After this incident, I was impressed with the dash 13 engine's toughness, and considered it second only to the H-34s R1820 piston banger.

After reporting the incident to Udorn over the high frequency radio, we left the helicopter at the field pending an inspection team's arrival the next day, and repaired to the hostel. Pat, of the Mormon faith, did not partake in hard drink, but requiring some liquid refreshment to ease the stress of the day and pour libation to the gods, I sauntered down the street to our favorite open-air watering hole.

Although not pertaining to the recent acquisition of the dash 13 Lycoming engine, the incident was a culmination of maintenance problems that cropped up about two years after receiving the new machines. This unprecedented emergency was ironic, as I had previously been the person to challenge Air Asia Tainan regarding the repair of fuel control unit (FCU) and governor components. For my trouble, I received a bad-mouthing from higher ups at Air Asia.

I enjoyed flying the easy-to-handle and versatile Huey. I considered us very fortunate that day, for it appeared that when Bell emergencies occurred, they were instantaneous and quite severe, leaving little time for diagnosis or introspection. Emergencies were unlike those in the UH34D which usually telegraphed impending trouble through instrument readings, unusual noises, or vibrations. All in all, this was just another

in a long line of "moments of truth" that I had come to expect in the Bell and, for that matter, any helicopter.

That night the besieged unit on Phou Katon maneuvered away from the landing zone and another attempt to extract the WIAs was planned. Despite onslaughts of U.S. air, two more extraction attempts by H-34 pilots were aborted. However, enemy casualties were piling up.

Having nothing to fly, I was relieved. I spent all day waiting to deadhead home. During this period, a field maintenance team arrived to change Juliet's engine and packaged the offending engine for a tear down and thorough inspection at Air Asia, Tainan, Taiwan. I continued to marvel at our luck when Scratch, who usually had inside information on just about everything, later informed me that all the engine power turbine wheels had been severely cracked.

Late in the day, along with Mike Jarina, I left on CASI C-47 50K (Kip) for home plate.

By the fifth, friendly tactical close air support allowed H-34 pilots to retrieve the wounded SGU troops. While part of the task force withdrew through the mountains to the west without supply, another portion remained in the field on the east side and returned to the road interdiction task, seeding mines along Route-9 close to Tchepone and engaging the enemy. Following a final air engagement which badly savaged the enemy, the battalions withdrew to Mounq Phalane. By 13 November, the operation was officially declared at an end.

When the three operations--Gauntlet, Tailwind, and Gauntlet Two--were analyzed as one, Seventh Air Force people acknowledged that together they constituted *"the most successful of all irregular operations against the Ho Chi Minh Trail [system]"*

MEANWHILE IN MR-2

On Tuesday the sixth, after a local transition session, Emmet Sullivan, Phil Velasquez, and I crewed 35F to The Alternate. Emmet, yet another transferee from Bob Hitchman's Saigon Bell program, was transitioning into our Bells after first serving time in the H-34 program as per the CPH's policy. Good weather prevailed and we were able to fly over nine and a half hours supporting the multitude of defensive pads and latest area offensives toward the edge of the Plain of Jars. After I had explained the defensive pattern and showed Emmet "safe" route structures, he performed most of the landings, but I conducted the difficult ones. One emergency Special Mission was scheduled in the Than Heup (LS-238) area, south of the Nam Ngum between Nam Pit and San Luang (LS-41), to extract WIAs sustained in the latest fighting. We RTB and touched down on the parking ramp at dark.

Bell engines and components continued to plague and cause us mental indigestion. On the same day that Emmet and I were bouncing off hills around Long Tieng in 35F, while working in the Mounng Nham (LS-63) area twelve miles east of Tha Thom, the PIC of Papa Foxtrot Gulf incurred an engine failure departing a pad on the northern perimeter of the valley. Following a successful autorotation, Customer Dick Mann and his running mate provided security for the ship pending an engine change.

Naturally, the Maintenance and Operations Departments were anxious to remove Golf from a somewhat unsecure area. Therefore, on the seventh, a maintenance field team and I boarded 374 for The Alternate. From there we were flown to Site-63 on Hotel-63. It was late morning before Bob Hohman and his experienced team began erecting the field expediency "A" frame hoist and making preparations to remove the -13 engine, with hopes of soon

receiving the replacement engine and completing all work by late afternoon.

I had forgotten how hot and humid those low eastern valleys were during any period of the year. Therefore, I attempted to remain cool and minimize boredom, while waiting for an opportunity to conduct engine checks and FCF the machine before the ferry flight to Udorn. It did not happen. The new engine was late arriving and the complete engine change was slipped to the next day. We rode home on 445, arriving at dark.

Unlike the previous day, when deadhead time and aircraft switching consumed so much time, the pilot of 13F delivered us directly to Mounng Nham. Work proceeded at a brisk pace, and with the engine topped off with oil, I finally had the opportunity to perform my part of the recovery. All went well and we were back in Udorn by early afternoon.

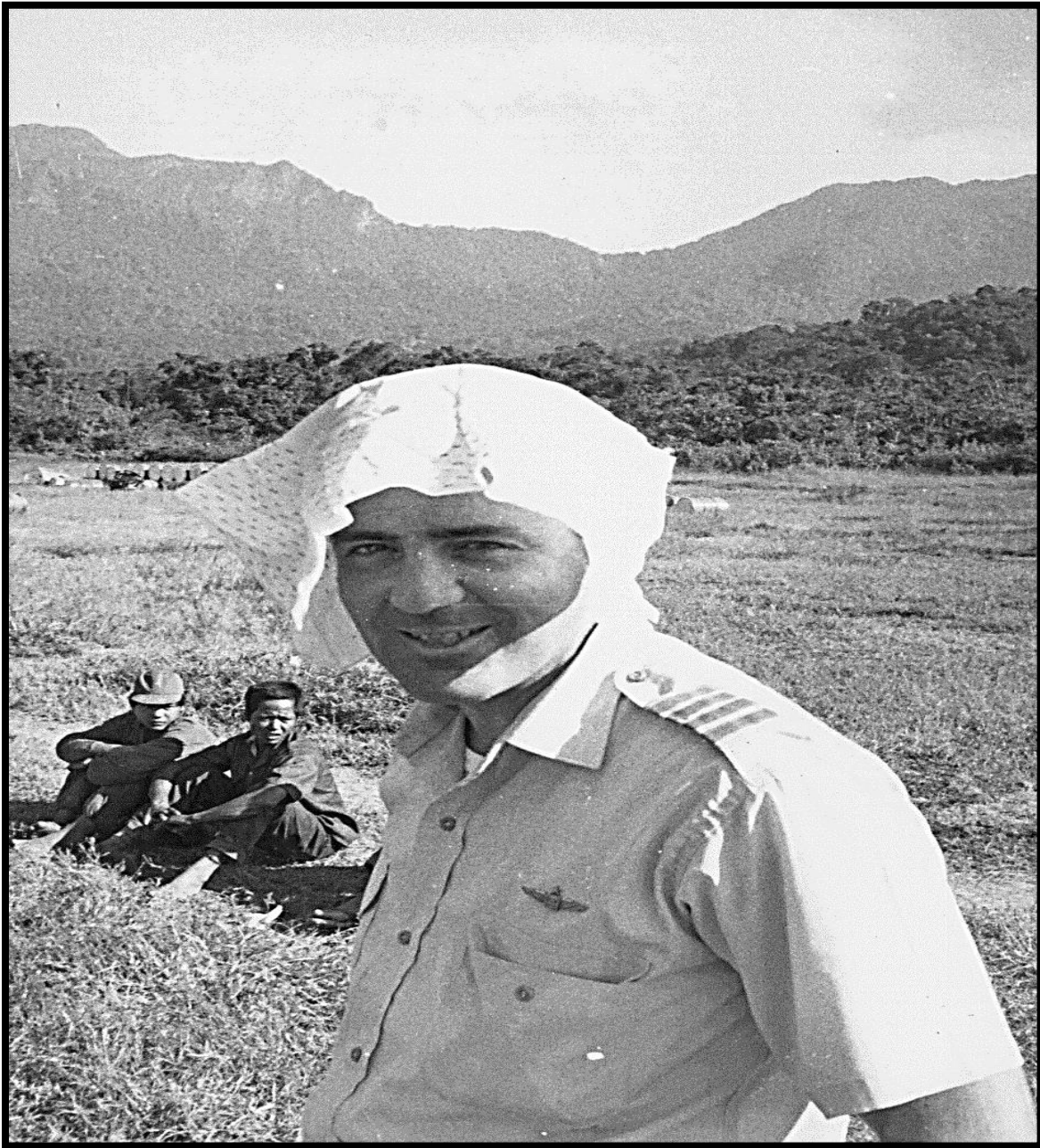
With PFJ back in the air, Mike Jarina flew to Long Tieng on the ninth to work support missions and a RON.

Mike worked the defensive area on Tuesday and then RTB Udorn.

BURMA BEN

Some colorful stories accorded our helicopter pilots were indeed stranger than fiction. They actually occurred and were simply impossible to fabricate or embellish.

H-34 Captain Ben Van Etten and his family had just returned from leave in the States. While checking his mail at the Air America facility, the jet-lagged individual found his name emblazoned on the schedule for a flight the following morning. He was slated to RON and work out of Ban Houei Sai in northwestern Military Region One. Houei Sai, bordered by Thailand, was the last sizeable river town in that part of Laos,



A mug shot of the grinning Author taken by ground maintenance mechanic, Bob Hohman, in the Lima Site-63 valley. Adding a modicum of charm to the distinctive Air America uniform, complete with Captain epaulets and wings, expedient headgear was worn in an attempt to ward off November's punishing sunrays. Lao admirers look on.

Author Collection.



Author holding up and forming a bond with Papa Foxtrot Gulf in anticipation of a successful engine change on 11/08/70. Wearing a "T" shirt, Bell maintenance lead man, Bob Hohman, strolling by with his repair team.

Author Collection.



The dash 13 field engine installation complete on Papa Foxtrot Gulf, the Author is preparing to start the newly installed power plant to check for leaks and normal operating parameters prior to a ferry flight to Udorn.

Author Collection.

but such a statement depended on the eye of the beholder, for the backwater town was still a rudimentary place to live. I often wondered if there were more geckos there than humans.

After loading his RON gear and conducting a preflight, Ben taxied Hotel-62 along the ramp to the runway with Flight Mechanic Manu Latloi, and launched northwest for the long trip to Lima-25.

At Ban Houei Sai he was instructed to cross the Mekong River to the Chiang Kong strip for a mission. While 2,200 pounds of tinned meat was loaded and the ship refueled by Latloi, who had been released on his first unaccompanied trip upcountry, Ben was briefed on the destination at a site about fifty miles to the north, close to the Burma/China/Lao border.

After takeoff, Ben gradually climbed to 2,500 feet. This required a high manifold power setting because of the extra heavy payload encumbering the ship. The outbound flight path took him over a well-travelled road, reputedly used by the Chinese and opium runners bound to and from Burma. Since the Opium War in 1967, heavy weapons accompanied the caravans. Therefore, he elected to continue an ascent through broken clouds and then descend on the far side of the road. Clearing the highest clouds at 8,500 feet above sea level (ASL), he found himself on top over a solid undercast. He decided to proceed while looking for a break in the cloud layer. If, after twenty minutes no hole was in sight, he planned to reverse course and fly back toward his departure point.

Before initiating this maneuver, he discovered a "crease" in the cloud layer and commenced a slow descent, eventually breaking out into the clear. Attempting to reestablish his bearings and make corrections to his destination, he failed to recognize any terrain beneath him. Then he saw a large town that he believed was Mounng Sing (I never saw a town there). The

surface winds at Tango-516 had been westerly, so he considered that he might be too far east and over enemy territory. (Actually, high velocity winds aloft were easterly.) Ben added power and climbed back into the clouds, on top away from anticipated AAA fire. He then turned west, calculating a breakout over the Mekong near his destination. Completely unsure of his position, after failing to receive a signal from the 400-watt Nam Yu non-directional beacon (NDB-293kc) (the beacon was down for maintenance), he requested a direction finding (DF) steer from Elmer Munsell, who he heard flying somewhere in the region. This failed, as Elmer was probably too low and too far away to receive his calls.

Some openings were beginning to develop in the solid cloud layer, so Ben chose one and descended while flying west. Still attempting to tune a radio station that might take him into Thailand, he encountered a strong signal that he thought might be Chiang Mai in northwestern Thailand and headed southwest.

Time passed and he noted that a low fuel state was fast becoming a problem. Compounding the requirement for fuel, it was also late in the day. Then, in the distance, he saw a medium sized twin engine plane with its gear down preparing to land. The sighting was timely and tended to restore his confidence that he was indeed in Thailand and the plane, perhaps a commercial Thai Airways aircraft, was going to land at either the Chiang Rai or Chiang Mai airport. He followed the plane to its destination and attempted to contact the tower, but was unsuccessful. The impression that he was in Thailand dissipated when a green flare was discharged from the tower. This would never do that. Despite this turn in events, he was perilously low on fuel and out of ideas, committed to land at the unknown airport. Despite the obvious warning, he continued an approach and landed beside the tower, all the while hoping he might be

able to procure fuel, determine his location, and be on his way back to base.

Within minutes, the H-34 was surrounded by soldiers brandishing weapons in the direction of the helicopter and crew. An officer shouted to him in English to secure the helicopter, not make any radio calls, and to exit the cockpit. Ben's comedy of errors was now approaching an end phase.

While Manu remained at the aircraft, Ben was taken to a small building for interrogation. After five hours of grilling, he learned that he was in Burma. He had his picture taken, and was continuously asked if there were any machine guns or cameras on board his helicopter. The officer in charge of the questioning was convinced that the crew consisted of Air Force personnel conducting a spy mission. He consulted a book that listed Air Force aircraft and the UH-34D was not displayed. The Kaman H-43 was, so the officer insisted Ben's ship was an H-43. After fifteen minutes of this browbeating, Ben said, yes, it was an H-43. After two hours he had to urinate. Accompanied by a guard, he was directed to the nearest tree. However, with the man pointing a gun at him, the desire to void his bladder dissipated.

While Ben was having fun, Manu was being questioned at Hotel-62, while the tinned meat was being unloaded. All loose items were stripped out of the cargo compartment by personnel wearing military uniforms. During the process, the crew's two Israeli Uzi guns were discovered, which caused some unpleasantness. Photos of the crew were taken next to the weapons. However, what confused the Burmese most was the fact that Van Etten had approached the airfield from the north. This caused them to assume he was a spy working for the U Nu faction's bid to return to power.

Following a five-hour interview, the crew was herded into a vehicle and driven for an hour through thick forests into mountainous terrain to a military encampment. For nine days they were incarcerated in a small, one room building containing two beds and a bathroom.

The acting commanding officer, a captain in his mid-forties, arrived to welcome them to his compound. Captain Dauwing made sure they were fed rice and weeds, and treated to the local soda pop. He told them to sleep first and they would talk in the morning.

Serious interrogation began in the morning. The particularly obnoxious person conducting the questioning was older than anyone Ben had encountered thus far. Looking Chinese, he had a round head, wore glasses, had yellowing, deteriorating teeth, and spoke the "Queen's English." The man seemed mostly interested in American military equipment, so Ben told him what he thought he wanted to hear.

During the next two days a good cop/bad cop relationship developed between Ali King, who insisted Ben was in the USAF and a spy, and the humanitarian good guy, who brought Ben the local brandy.

Flight Mechanic Latloi was interrogated separately and treated differently, for diplomatic relations between Thailand and Burma were not good. As an affront, his interrogators refused to question him in anything but English, a language Latloi spoke poorly. Continuously harassed, Latloi soon became paranoid. Like in a World War Two movie he had recently attended, in which the Nazis slaughtered prisoners, he was concerned for his life. The presence of the Uzis and the misunderstanding over the explanation he offered that they were carried solely for survival purposes, particularly concerned him.

Ben and Manu compared notes at night, and Ben attempted to assure Latloi that he did not believe they would be killed. However, to cover this possibility, they conceived a plan of escape. After a few days, no longer watched closely, Ben informed Manu if he still felt threatened and escaped, he would join him on a distant hill.

Despite the inherent threat, life was not that bad. They shared the same marginal food everyone else ate. Although they were not shackled or excessively confined, nocturnal insects did constitute a problem. Their quarters were not screened, mosquito netting was at a minimum, and the only can of mosquito spray was exhausted. They attempted to cover exposed skin at night while sleeping.

As each day passed Ben began to feel more comfortable with his situation, confident that he would soon be returned to Thailand. Reinforcing this conviction, every day he was informed by his captors that he would be released. Moreover, as a former Army warrant officer, recalling the "leave no man behind" policy, he was further reassured that his people were working behind the scenes to obtain his release.

Interrogations were reduced to three hours, but the grinning Chinese still probed for information. He was convinced that American B-52 bombers flew out of Udorn, and wanted confirmation. Exasperated by the man's banter, on the fourth day, Ben told him that they had not discovered all the aircraft's radio equipment. He retained one item, that after pushing a button on the transmitter, F-4 jets would soon bomb the compound. Highly agitated, "Bad Mouth" circled the table twice and then rushed out of the room. Twenty minutes later, the commanding officer entered, inquiring about an air strike. Ben admitted that he disliked the interrogator and had conceived the story merely as a joke. He never saw the Chinese man again.



Captain Ben Van Etten--"Burma Ben."

Captain Dauwing continued to insist that the crew would soon be released, but by the ninth day, Ben began to despair he would ever see Udorn or his family again.

On 19 November, the two men were driven down the mountain to the airport terminal. Prior to release, Van Etten was required to sign a ten-copy statement in the presence of Burmese officials, thanking them for their hospitality. The declaration further stipulated that he had been carrying guns, violated sovereign Burmese airspace, and would never do this again.

A drum of aviation fuel had been trucked to the Thai border and transported to the airfield. Ben found that everything previously removed from Hotel-62 for cataloguing had been replaced. Following the manual refueling, Ben cranked up and launched. He flew thirty minutes across the border to Mai Sai, where he landed to apprise Thai authorities of his presence. He also called Chief Pilot Phil Goddard, who informed him to look the helicopter over well to eliminate any possibility of tampering, and then RTB Udorn. Ben and Manu had already thoroughly inspected the ship prior to leaving Burmese airspace, so Ben continued on to Ban Houei Sai, where he refueled. By the time he reached Udorn, he had logged four hours.

During Van Etten's debriefing with Pat Landry at AB-1, Ben produced one of the statements he had signed. He also learned that President Nixon had participated in obtaining his release. Later, Captain Leon Lashomb informed him that 100,000 dollars had been exchanged.

Of course, we all desired knowledge of Ben's disposition, but when details regarding the incident emerged, bar wags made the most of it, and Van Etten was tagged with the moniker "Burma Ben." This continued until the novelty wore off and someone else, like Fonburg, could be bashed.

Ben was not unique as being the only pilot who violated the Burmese border. I penetrated the airspace several times fifteen miles north of Nam Yu when assigned to service northern sites, or when taking a shortcut eight miles northeast of MOUNG MOUNGE (LS-93).

At this geographic juncture the border defining Mekong, only four miles at its widest point, bulged seven miles into Laos. One could easily traverse the remote, densely forested hills at altitude and save time. Who would know? I was emboldened to do this by the knowledge that, unlike the Chinese air force, the Burmese were not reported to have any fighter planes in the area close to the border. It was amazing what one would do to create a little respite to a boring routine. Moreover, I gained satisfaction doing this. Helio Courier/Porter Captain Al Rich, who spent a lot of time in Udorn, once confessed to me that during bad weather he had strayed over borders and been shot at while buzzing strips to determine his location. I am quite sure there were many unmentioned other pilots guilty of cross border incursions at some time in their flying careers.

I was off the flight schedule for eleven days, part of it down with a touch of flu, or allergy problems caused by dust constantly filtering over the entire town from the destroyed roads...and it was hot. The air conditioner helped a bit and made me wonder how we had ever survived without it in the past.

Rick was healing nicely after his operation, and I planned to send him back to Mrs. Jabbarina's play school the following month.

SITUATION IN MR-1

By late fall Chinese, North Vietnamese, and Pathet Lao soldiers controlled vast areas in Military Region One. Thin in

number, FAR and SGU troops were unable to perform tangible operations. Therefore, government military leaders and the Agency station attempted to keep the enemy off balance, away from Luang Prabang, and to gather intelligence relating to movement toward the royal capital.

Search and rescue missions for Air America crews never ceased in Laos, and often occurred at the most unlikely times. No one was immune. Certainly, every helicopter pilot participated in at least one rescue--some several.

Requirements for double crewed helicopters reached a high level in 1970. Fortunately, the pipeline was full in September, and Byron Ruck, a retired USMC major, was hired along with at least ten other pilots. While interviewing in Washington, Ruck received the same vague, canned spiel from Red Dawson relating to Air America operations in Laos.

After Ruck arrived in Udorn, like many other newcomers in the H-34 program, he discovered senior helicopter pilots to be a tight knit group, not particularly friendly toward new hires.⁶

When Ruck began flying upcountry, he was surprised that normal missions were similar to those he had participated in during his Vietnam tour. However, he was not prepared for missions "above and beyond the call."

On 13 November, Captain Duane Keele, First Officer Ruck, and a Filipino Flight Mechanic, flying northwest out of Luang Prabang, dropped off an intelligence gathering team on high ground in the vicinity of the Chinese Road. After releasing

⁶ Ruck failed to understand that this was the case from the beginning of the helicopter program. In 1962, the Author endured this superiority attitude for months. At the time of Ruck's hiring, the number of pilots was rapidly escalating, so that learning names or interaction was virtually impossible, unless one worked directly with another pilot. In addition, separate helicopter programs tended to compartmentalize work mates.

their Lao T-28 cover to conduct a secondary mission, the (two) H-34 crews proceeded back toward Luang Prabang, empty, when they heard a Mayday call from an excited T-28 Lao pilot whose leader had been downed by enemy fire.

Keele intercepted a point about five miles northwest of the confluence of the Nam Ou and Mekong, where the pilot had parachuted into the tall hardwood trees abounding in the area. At that juncture, from a hover, the pilot appeared uninjured. Without benefit of a briefing, but aware that enemy troops were somewhere in the area, a decision was made to lower the hoist cable and attached horse collar to retrieve the man.

The yellow horse collar, a light, buoyant lifting device unique to UH-34D rescue work, required some wearer indoctrination as to the method of placing it over one's head and under crossed arms. All USMC aviators had received this training during both land and sea conditions. If installed incorrectly, a person could easily slip out of the collar. This is exactly what happened to the T-28 pilot while forty feet in the air. Plunging through trees and branches, he landed hard and remained motionless.

Realizing that they could not leave a fellow aviator on the ground untended without severe repercussions from both Customer and peers, and that the Flight Mechanic was needed to operate the hoist switch, Duane proposed that his First Officer go down on the horse collar and retrieve the man. This did not constitute a precedent, and had been performed at least twice before by Company pilots over the years. Surprised, but realizing the seriousness of the situation, Ruck agreed to give it a try. However, all the while he wondered if this was standard procedure for Air America pilots.

After lifting his seat pan and climbing down from the cockpit into the cabin section, he donned the horse collar and

stepped out into airspace just above the jungle treetops. When he reached the ground and observed the unconscious Lao pilot bleeding from the nose and mouth, he wondered if the man had sustained internal injuries and if he would survive. He picked the man up (Lao men were not particularly heavy) and signaled for the lift. As the hoist motor was designed to reel in steel cable slowly to prevent overheating and failure, the ascent was necessarily and exasperatingly slow.

Duane flew the Lao to Luang Prabang, where a C-130 crew delivered him to a military hospital in Thailand. Ruck later visited the pilot, discovering that he had incurred broken ribs, a punctured lung, and a concussion during the fall. The man was everlastingly grateful for the rescue and indicated that he was going to give up flying and enter a wat as a monk to pay homage to Lord Buddha for his good luck.

While discussing the incident over drinks in the Club bar, Ruck found that older pilots like Ted Cash and Pogo Hunter were not that impressed with his effort. Disregarding his courageous feat, they were intent on telling a story about another pilot previously performing a similar rescue.

Many flights were conducted by H-34 pilots northwest of Luang Prabang. Most involved some form of road watch or interdiction missions in and around the Beng Valley. Crews were usually briefed to beware of the large caliber guns that accompanied the Chinese construction workers on the road.

Another trip northwest of Lima-54 involved Duane Keele, Frank Stergar, and several other helicopter crews moving troops from one location to another. Duane recalled it as one in which he committed his most aggressive act during his Air America career.

The troops were very eager to vacate the area. One soldier had been informed by the Flight Mechanic or a loader that the

maximum number of men had been reached for departure. Not satisfied, as Duane was pulling pitch in preparation to depart, the man appeared beneath the cockpit window and began gesturing that he needed to leave. When Duane nodded his head no, the man began raising his rifle toward the cockpit in a threatening manner. It was the wrong move for the man to make, for during takeoff the right tire caught the disgruntled person in the chest, sending him off the rough landing zone and over the side of the mountain, likely into the hands of Buddha. Duane was not sure of the length of the drop, but estimated about 500 feet above the jungle floor. At any rate, he probably taught the man a lesson in etiquette with a helicopter pilot, if he lived. Nothing was said about the incident when Keele returned for another trip, but to a different landing zone. ⁷

Attesting to the danger of flying over or in the vicinity of the Chinese Road emerged when Duane was directed by the Luang Prabang Customer to head in the direction of the Beng Valley. Apparently, an Air Lao commercial flight had radioed a Mayday. Bound from Ban Houei Sai to Luang Prabang, the PIC had foolishly taken a shortcut directly east and encountered a problem.

Duane intersected the plane's track. Passing underneath, he reversed his course, and looking up observed a manhole cover size hole or larger, in one wing. Amazed that the wing had not failed, Keele continued to trail the aircraft into the royal capital without incident. There would be worse incidents over the road in the future.

⁷ Keele's incident was not unique. Many of us, including the Author, had experienced similar events with varying degrees of success.

JARINA

While Ben Van Etten and Manu Latloi were enjoying Burmese style hospitality, on the eleventh, Mike Jarina and crew flew to Thakhet in Papa Foxtrot Juliet to conduct two Special Missions northwest along Route-8 in the Lak Sao (LS-49) area, where the road runs through the Nape Pass. The crews RON at the Nakhon Phanom base to be in position to relocate to the primary work site in Military Region Two.

Mike worked out of Long Tieng the next day and then RTB Udorn for a maintenance inspection.

He returned to The Alternate on Friday in Papa Foxtrot Hotel to work the Site-72 area and RON at the 20A hostel.

He then worked the following day in The Alternate area before returning Papa Foxtrot Hotel to Udorn.

On the 19th, Mike was back at Long Tieng in Papa Foxtrot Juliet to work positions in the hills surrounding the Sam Tong area.

As previously noted, a friendly position almost two miles north of Site-15 had been captured by the enemy on the 14th, reclaimed the next day, and lost again. On the day Jarina was working the area, government troops assaulted the site, and after moving in, discovered it abandoned. The action attested to the stark fact that the barbarians were still massing at our gates, biding their time until conditions were suitable for another dry season thrust at the Sam Tong-Long Tieng defenses.

While Mike continued flying supply missions in The Alternate area the next day, after 96W was declared airworthy, Phil Velasquez and I ferried the ship to Site-20A to work. Even though I arrived in the afternoon, I still conducted fifteen landings.

Early in the dark of morning, while we slept peacefully in the hostel, amid a very large diversionary strike in North

Vietnam, USAF helicopter crews and supporting aircraft over headed Long Tieng to pursue what would be known as the Son Tay Raid, an ambitious mission tailored to extract many American POWs. Because of faulty intelligence, the mission was only partially successful. The helicopter unit successfully breached the prisoner compound, but soon discovered that the men had been moved to another compound.

Saturday, I joined another pilot in 13F to conduct Special Missions. Along with Jarina, who was still flying Papa Foxtrot Hotel, we performed four landings at the "Oscar pad" near Phou Vieng (LS-6) west of Bouam Long. Switching back to 96W, I flew additional supply missions and then was called home for maintenance. Jarina also RTB.

On the 22nd, I was scheduled to FCF 96W and Papa Foxtrot Gulf when they were wheeled out of the hangar after maintenance inspections. Although I only logged an hour on each helicopter, testing and tracking was generally an all-day chore. As part of my instructor pilot duties, testing and releasing Bells for upcountry work was to consume much of my time. Moreover, this was frustrating, for even though there was pressure to produce a viable helicopter for the ever-increasing Special Mission requirements, I vowed not to only release an airworthy aircraft, but also one tracked within tolerable limits. Over time blades were degraded from foreign object damage (FOD), and sand blasting, mismatched as to weight, and contained bullet hole patches. Moreover, trunion bearings and other worn components contributed to out-of-track conditions. Because of these items, tracking often proved a chore beyond my control, and would eventually lead to animosity between line maintenance personnel me and.

That same day the Customer aborted a Special Mission out of Thakhet for any number of reasons that could have related to

weather, enemy situation, or the team not being in place for extraction. Therefore, Jarina, flying Papa Foxtrot Hotel, and other involved crews, returned to Udorn.

Monday morning, Jon Stewart, Len Bevan, and I crewed 96W to Thakhet west (LS-40A). Even though it was designated west in the Air Facilities Data Pamphlet, the strip was actually located three miles east-southeast of Thakhet town along the north side of Route-13. Created long ago for increased security, the isolated site was established far removed from prying eyes of individuals in town.

After briefing, loading, and joining with our assigned A-1E escort, the late mission was accomplished north-northeast to one of the several landing zones near Route-12. Since the insertion was performed late, and we were scheduled to work at Alternate the following day, we RON at the Nakhon Phanom airbase.

Instructor pilot remuneration was not sanctioned for Special Missions or ferry flight, only local training and hands-on field work. Since Jon was still not fully transitioned in the Bell, after a leisurely breakfast and a one-and-a-half-hour trip to Long Tieng, I logged six hours instructor time. Occasionally flying into difficult landing zones, I encouraged Jon to fly most supply missions, only taking command for a difficult WIA pickup in the Ban Na area.

Jon was becoming so proficient in mountain techniques that I allowed him to perform all take offs and landings, only spelling him en route. Even though I loved to fly, I also enjoyed seeing a person develop so fast.

Toward the end of the day, I was advised to switch to Papa Foxtrot Gulf and ferry the machine to Udorn for a scheduled maintenance inspection. Logging fifty-five minutes of night time, I landed well after dark.

Apparently, a fiscal money crunch was occurring toward year's end. Although not specific as to the exact subject, I wrote home:

"The money pinch is even showing up here now. It is disgusting the way they [the Customer] think. They can expend thousands of dollars in ordinance for nothing at all or resupply a position and have the locals run off and leave everything at considerable cost. Then they try and cut costs at our expense. I'll never understand it."

11/28/70 Letter Home.

Thursday afternoon I was summoned to the airfield to test fly Bell 205 Papa Foxtrot Gulf. Fortunately, the aircraft was in fairly good shape. It only required two hours of tender loving care consisting of tracking and four landings before releasing it for field work:

"I was home for Thanksgiving, but had to test fly one of our Bells. There were a couple of parties and Tuie and the boys went to the afternoon one. I arrived later and it looked as if the boys had a good time..."

Continuing 11/28/70 Letter.

SAN TIAU

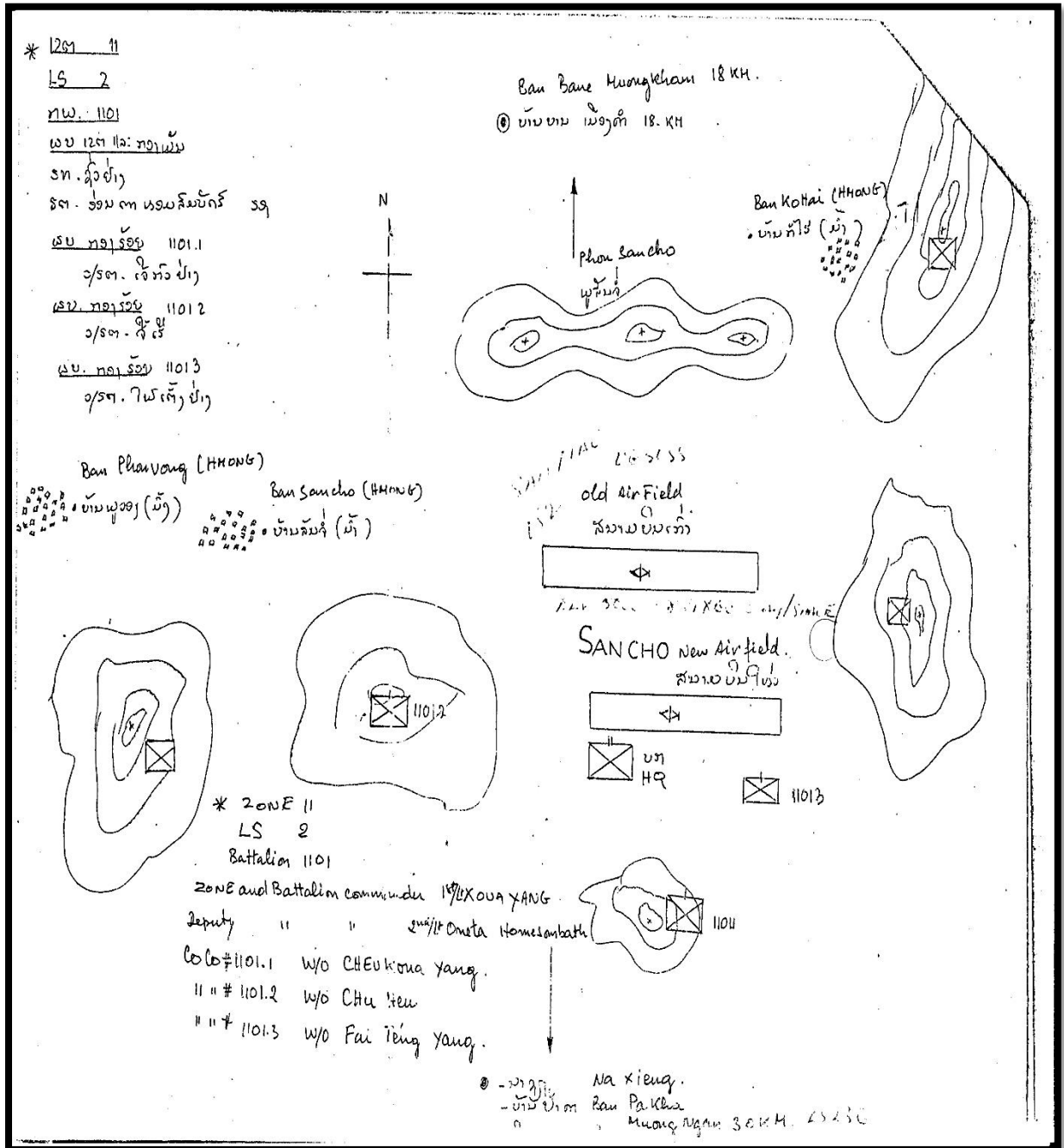
Despite ongoing U.S. Air Force interdiction along Route-7 through the Ban Ban complex, a heavily forested valley containing several primary and secondary roads plus two rivers, vehicular-transported supplies from North Vietnam were still moving west along refurbished LOCs toward the Plain of Jars. At several locations along Route-7 and west of Ban Ban supplies

were massed in stockpiles, in preparation for and anticipating the annual dry season push against RLG forces in Military Region Two.

Supplementing Air Force efforts to measurably slow traffic and deny unrestricted access through the valley, and to create a diversion from Long Tieng, with the Washington proposal to de-escalate RLG military action in Military Region Two scrapped, **Counterpunch Three**, an ambitious ground interdiction operation, was conceived by the Vientiane Embassy and approved in lieu of Vang Pao's grandiose plans to move his forces back onto the Plain of Jars. The ground operation consisted of a multi-battalion group mobile force advised by former USMC LRRP team member (long range reconnaissance patrol), George O'Dell, and one battalion of trained Meo ADC gathered from the surrounding hills of Zone Steel. After insertion and rallying forces in the Site-02 area, the units planned to move eight miles north to preprogrammed objectives and commence clearing actions along Route-7, to include impacting the Ban Ban logistic center. As a diversion, long favored by Vang Pao, ADC troops from Site-32 would move south to high ground, where they could harass the Nong Pet junction.

The operation would be supported by increased 7th Air Force tactical air sorties that could be dramatically augmented should the situation dictate a need.

Despite the generic phrasing "dry season," actual conditions varied yearly and did not signify that good weather necessarily prevailed on a daily basis. Nasty weather systems from China often worked through the area and morning fog usually impacted valleys and streambeds during this fragile season. In addition, high winds often created clear air turbulence (CAT), fostering hazardous flying conditions in and around mountain



A hand rendering of San Tiau (LS-02) and the area by an indigenous Meo person.

Author Collection.

ranges. Therefore, in general, a more accurate description of the early annual dry season in Military Region Two for an aviator would actually be described as a windy, foggy season.

Beset by less than acceptable weather conditions, waffling between agencies, Meo morale factors, and other normal logistic delays, the Ban Ban operation finally commenced on the night of the 26th, with a Commando Raider pathfinder team lifted by USAF CH-3 helicopter crews to a selected hilltop near the San Tiau strip. When FAG Badman radioed success in securing their initial objective, the next morning an armada of CH-3, CH-53C, and Air America Bells began lifting Digger's remaining GM-21 from Long Tieng to the eastern landing zone.

An Agency bulletin reported:

"A force of almost 1,000 irregular troops from Long Tieng and Khang Kho [LS-204] was airlifted into an area south of San Tiau, some ten miles south of Ban Ban, on 27 and 28 November. Initial reports indicate that attempts by the irregulars to secure San Tiau were met with enemy mortar and recoilless rifle fire. No casualties resulted, however. the presence of government troops in this sensitive sector should help to disrupt enemy supply efforts into the Plaine des Jarres and, consequently, the communist can be counted on to react sharply to this operation.

In the meantime, southwest of the Plaine, the enemy continues to put pressure on government outposts around Ban Na. Only one outpost was abandoned by irregular troops in scattered weekend clashes, however, and government losses were minimal.

Elsewhere, small enemy probing attacks on 26 and 27

November against a government position on the outskirts of Moung Soui were repulsed quickly [redacted]...⁸

After deadheading to The Alternate on Papa Foxtrot Gulf, I joined Ed Reid and Dave Crowell in Papa Foxtrot Hotel. As Reid rarely allowed anyone else to fly when his was PIC, I was generally along for the ride to satisfy the Special Mission double crew requirement. Working around foggy conditions, common to the late fall, we conducted four missions, during which I made one landing. That evening, I deadheaded home on C-123 64374.

Weather delays, lack of fuel, and some enemy resistance were encountered for three days when the group was finally in place ready to move north toward Lima Site-02.

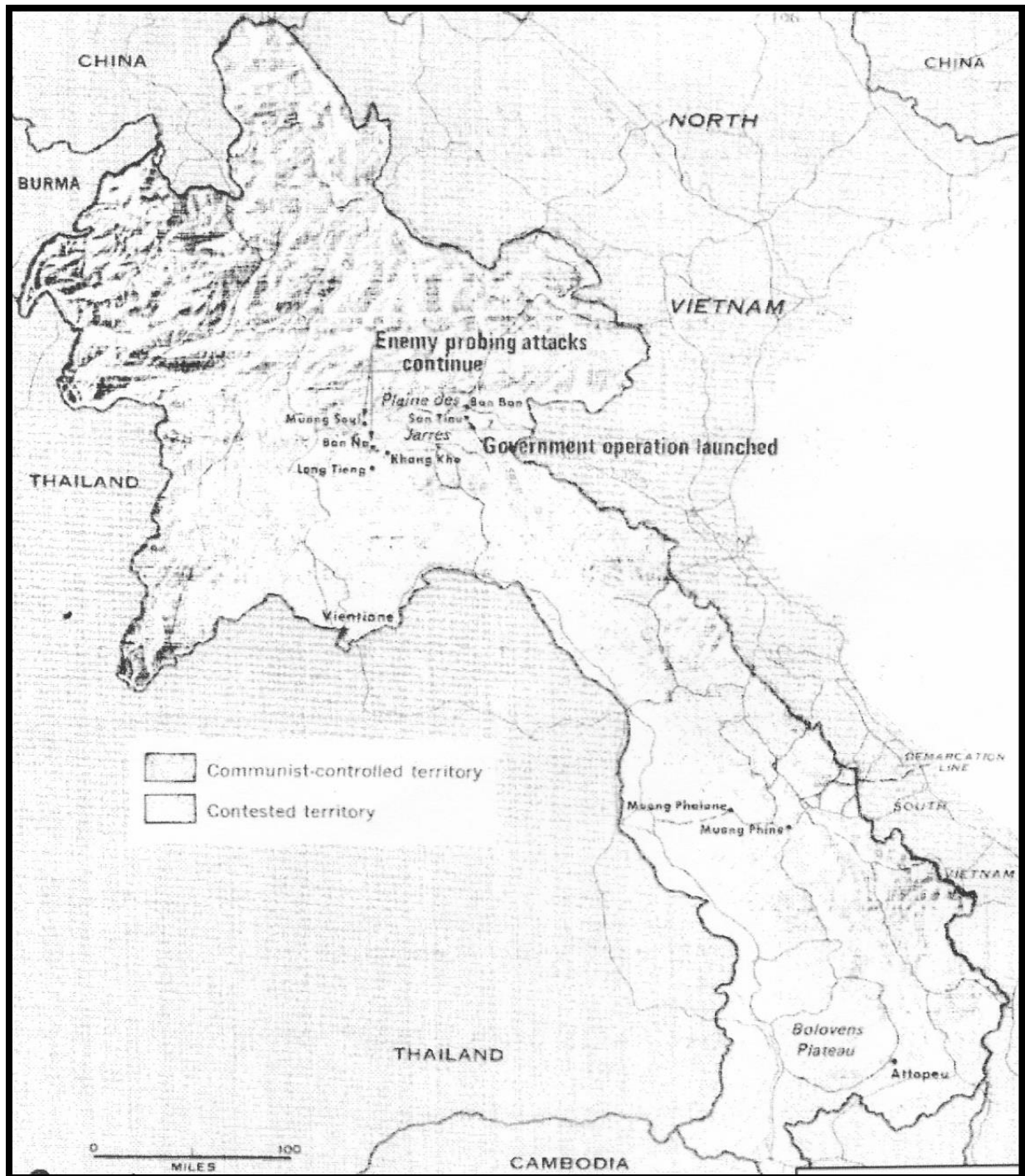
"Communist forces in the vicinity of Ban Ban have so far offered little resistance to the seven battalions of government troops that have entered the area...The 1,000-man irregular task force that was airlifted into positions south of Ban Ban has advanced to within two miles of its immediate objective at San Tiau, but is moving slowly because of poor weather.

*An additional 850 government troops (three battalions) from Bouam Long have moved into positions about four miles north of the Ban Ban valley and have had only scattered contact with the enemy. Like the government units to the south, these battalions intend to attack communist logistic assets in the Ban Ban area, but will be withdrawn after their primary mission have been accomplished."*⁹

On the 29th I deadheaded north on the 374 Peppergrinder flight to join Charlie Weitz and Terry Dunn in Papa Foxtrot Juliet. Together with Mike Jarina flying PFG, during a weather

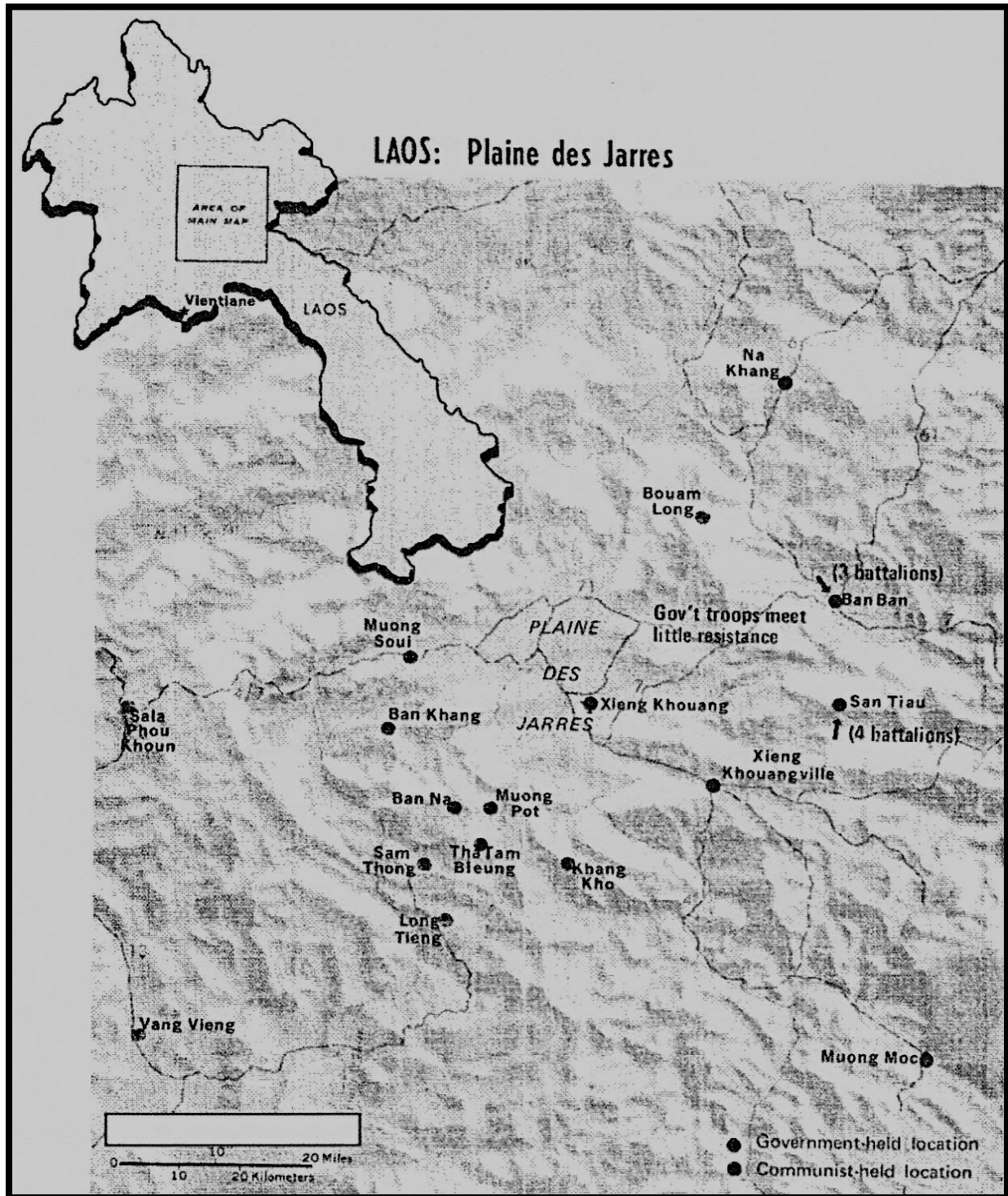
⁸ CIA Bulletin, 11/30/70. Laos: A large-scale government operation has begun in northern Laos near the communist logistics center at Ban Ban.

⁹ CIA Bulletin, Laos, 12/01/70.



Map showing locations and activity in Military Region Two around Mung Soui, Ban Na, and the operation at San Tiau.

CIA Map, 11/30/70.



Right center of map shows the area where Bouam Long troops moved toward Nong Pet from the north and the San Tiau forces moved north after capturing the site on 1 December.

CIA Map. 12/01/70.

shortened day, we supported the Bouam Long portion of the San Tiau-Ban Ban operation.

By then, a new Case Officer David Campbell, known as Red Coat, had been assigned to Site-32, replacing the team of Frank Odum (Bag) and Jerry Daniels (Hog). Within a few months Jerry would replace Wil Greene as COS Dick Johnson's Chief of Operations.

While Mike RON at Alternate, I deadheaded home on C-123 4545.

On the last day of the month, Mike continued supporting the Site-32 troop movement south toward the 7/71 split.

This same day I was assigned to FCF 204B 8512F. Even mundane and dreary FCFs were not without risk. After conducting static ground tests, and tracking, the final process of testing the machine required flight. Air taxiing from the parking ramp and obtaining clearance from the tower, I began takeoff from a hover on the grassy infield between the concrete runway and taxiway. As I began transitioning to forward flight, I observed the transmission oil pressure needle suddenly drop to zero. After rotating the nose up to an extreme attitude to reduce all ground speed, I plopped the aircraft into the grass, snapped the throttle to idle cutoff, and alerted the Company radio operator of my plight. With the engine secured and the rotor blades stopped, the Flight Mechanic and I climbed on top of the helicopter and discovered the oil cap located at the top of the transmission cover had worked loose, causing the thrashing gears inside the housing to discharge sufficient oil to trigger the emergency. Fortunately, this happened at the base and not in cruise or while working upcountry.

People from the Maintenance Department arrived to inspect and refill the component, after which we returned 12F to the ramp.

BOLOVENS

During Vientiane meetings, combined U.S. Embassy agency advisors prognosticated that Military Region Four would constitute the most formidable problem for the Royal Lao Government during the upcoming dry season. Continuing events in Cambodia would compel the Vietnamese to strengthen and expand the logistic supply routes through the Panhandle. It was also believed that new routes through the Bolovens Plateau would be developed. Therefore, it was incumbent for government troops to hold the Bolovens and interdict western supply routes to Cambodia and South Vietnam.

Under pressure, the two Savannakhet battalions located at PS-38 and PS-26 came under attack by Vietnamese units on 21 November.

"The prolonged lull in significant military activity on the Bolovens ended abruptly on 22 November as widespread attacks were made on Laotian guerrilla positions by an estimated three North Vietnamese battalions. The communists succeeded in taking the two key government bases on the plateau ten miles northwest of Attopeu as well as four other outposts in the same general area..."

It is too early to tell whether the North Vietnamese intend to hold these positions. Government [T-28] air strikes were directed against enemy units throughout the day on 22 November, and irregular forces are regrouping for counterattacks. If the communists succeed in consolidating their gains, the government's capability to harass enemy supply and troop movements through this region could be substantially affected..."

Friendly counterattacks managed to briefly retake PS-38, but it was lost again on the 27th.

As the enemy maneuvered north along the rocky Plateau rim, the large SGU training base at PS-22, located on the eastern rim, was probed. To fill the void of two battalions sent elsewhere for an operation, General Phasouk had dispatched two FAR battalions to the site for defensive purposes. These troops supplemented 1 SGU battalion. None proved much worth, when in early December Dac Cong teams infiltrated the complex, followed by a Vietnamese infantry attack. The defenders scattered with two thirds moving toward Houei Kong.

"There is evidence that the communists intend to increase pressure along the northern Bolovens. Three irregular battalions sweeping the area north of Paksong have reported contacts with communist troops that have moved within about five miles of Thateng and there have been several reports of a large enemy force moving into the area southwest of Saravane.

Villagers in the Lao Ngam area report that these forces will attack Paksong in the near future, but it is also possible that the communists will strike targets to west along Route-16.

The enemy has reportedly been moving a large amount of ammunition about ten miles east of Khong Sedone" ¹⁰

Colonel Soutchay Vongsavanh was dispatched to PS-22 to restore the situation to normal. He was afforded the services of an airborne battalion from Military Region Three. With assistance of Allied air, the camp was reoccupied and the SGU returned from the surrounding forests for duty. The unreliable and useless FAR battalions were sent back to Pakse.

The colonel later recalled:

"The NVA attacked again the next morning with artillery, mortars, and recoilless rifles, followed by an infantry attack,

¹⁰ CIA Daily Bulletin, 12/07/70. Laos: The communists have renewed their drive to clear government forces from the Bolovens Plateau attacking Sites-22, 26, and 38 on the eastern rim of the Plateau overlooking Route-16 and the Se Kong River.

but [with the help of Allied air] my airborne troops held and we kept PS-22."

The enemy continued nighttime attacks, but with support from USAF AC-119, C-47 gunship, and T-28 crews and pilots, the position held. During mid-December, a FAR reserve battalion was dispatched to help defend the site. Shortly afterward, the enemy attacked at night with three battalions. Although incurring heavy losses, the Vietnamese managed to enter the main base and capture a strong point. Fighting raged at dawn with Allied air and site weapons continuing to take a toll on the attackers. When the battle was over, the enemy had lost a substantial number of men. However, friendly losses were also high, and attacks continued on two subsequent nights.

"On 25 December two battalions of government irregulars at Pakse Site-172 on the southeastern rim of the Bolovens Plateau were attacked by two battalions of NVA and were forced to withdraw. the communists also probed farther north on the rim of the Plateau, Sites-22 and 165 but the attacks were repulsed. there was skirmishing along the northern rim, but the 9th NVA Regiment, which deployed to the area several weeks ago have yet challenged the irregular battalions operating south of the communist-held village of Thateng.

Thus far, the communists have been thwarted in their efforts to gain control of the Bolovens in order to open a major infiltration route into Cambodia in the southwestern panhandle..." ¹¹

Despite enemy pressure, government control of PS-22 was maintained through December.

¹¹ CIA Daily Bulletin, Laos, 12/28/70.

An Agency message was disseminated to interested parties relating to communist logistic Trail activity at the beginning of the dry season:

"Hanoi is continuing to send substantial numbers of troops, both replacements and complete units, down the infiltration trail this dry season. Some 17,100 NVA set off in November, the highest monthly total since February 1969. Over half are earmarked for COSVN probably for duty in Cambodia; about 4,400 are headed for northern South Vietnam; and about 2,500 including a regiment of NVA regulars are most likely bound for southern Laos. A minimum of four other regular regiments have also started south since September. One clearly is going to COSVN, two are now in southern Laos and a fourth is just above the DMZ. Two division headquarters are moving south through NVN and one is nearing the Lao and SVN border.

The pattern of over-all communist dry-season deployment in Indochina is still enfolding. It seems clear that many of these units are still on the move while others have been assigned to protect the vital Communist supply arteries running the length of Laos.

Communist truck movements in the Lao corridors have again increased after several weeks of reduced activity caused by unexpected heavy rains and intensified bombing. Enemy logistic organizations as far south as the confluence of the Cambodian/SVN/Lao borders [MR-4] are handling truck and waterborne cargo. Various sources confirm a recent sharp increase in truck traffic on two main North Vietnamese passes into Laos and around the end of the DMZ. It will be several weeks before the substantial quantity of supplies now moving will reach the tri-country border area.

The level of resupply during the latter part of November was apparently higher than that of a year ago. This trend is

likely to continue. During this dry season the Communists will have to send more supplies just to maintain the force structure and level of fighting of recent months in Laos and South Vietnam. Increased material will be needed to offset losses caused by Allied incursions last spring, the rainy season depletion of stocks, the loss of the Sihanoukville supply route, and the new need to supply increased tactical and rear service forces in Laos and Cambodia." ¹²

¹²Sequential Chapter Segment Sources:

FRUS #63, 11/03/70, Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon: Report on Southeast Asia by Director of Central Intelligence.

Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 339.

Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 370-371, 385-386.

Harry Blout, *CHECO*, Chapter 2, *The War in Northern Laos, The NVA Moves to the Offensive*.

Van Pao's Spoiling Action at Ban Ban, 16-18.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 266-267, 271-272, 278.

Bernard Nalty, *The War Against Trucks*, 145.

Clay, *CHECO* 103-104, 108.

Captain Ben Van Etten's Account of his unique Burma experience.

Van Etten did not escape media scrutiny. On 3 November an article titled **Air America Helicopter Detained by Burmese** by DE Ronk appeared in the *Washington Post*. As usual, in a press with an agenda and employing half-truths, many details were manufactured. Dated Vientiane, the article began: "U.S. spokesmen have confirmed that an American helicopter was detained by Burmese authorities when it was found to be operating inside their borders around the end of May [wrong month] of this year.

According to the U.S. spokesmen, the Air America helicopter supposedly violated Burma's airspace during 'bad weather.'"

Then the article became convoluted with twisted and wild speculative "facts" quoting the "best" sources in Bangkok. Adding sensationalism, a reporter maintained the helicopter crew was on a clandestine mission to visit CIA camps within the country. That a Burmese military attaché was onboard providing U.S. assistance to the ousted former Ne Win government.

Mike Jarina Interviews.

Bill Leary Notes from 11/13/70 Involving Interviews from former Captains Duane Keele and Byron Ruck.

Duane Keele, Emails, 12/08/13, 12/09/13; 12/10/13.

Leary November 1970 Notes relating to Case Officers.

Jim Parker *Timeline*, 8.

11/23/70 CIA Bulletin, Communist forces have overrun the principal government bases on the southwestern rim of the Bolovens Plateau.

Soutchay, 48.
Weekly Review, Far East, 12/04/70, 5-(focia.gv/scripts/cgiserv).

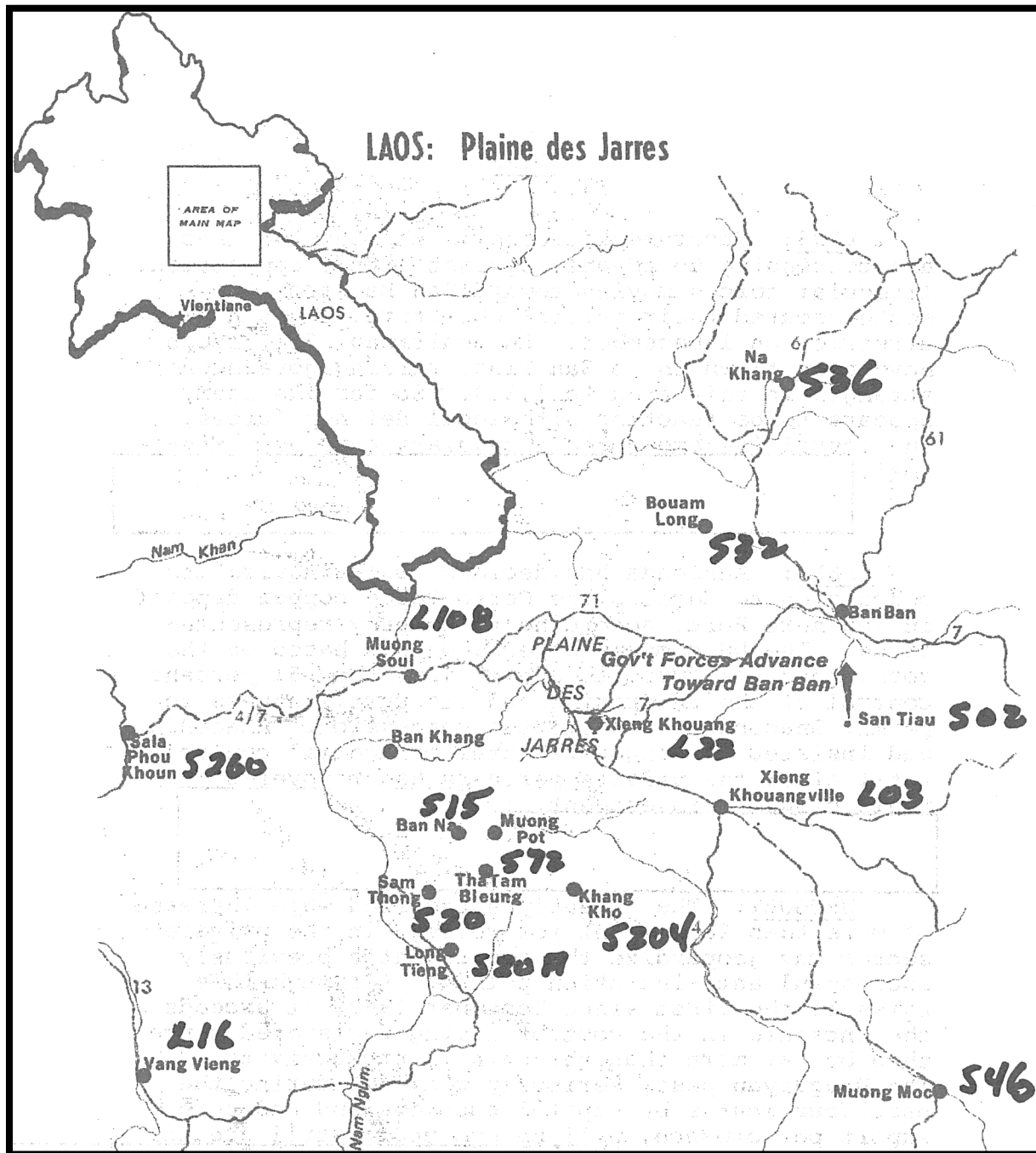
"[In Zone Steel] government troops in the Ban Ban area are continuing to advance against little opposition. Irregular forces moving toward Ban Ban from the south secured their initial objective, the San Tiau airstrip, on 1 December. ¹ An additional 350 troops have been flown in to San Tiau, raising government strength in this area to 1,310. So far, the enemy appears to be reacting with local defense forces, and casualties among the irregulars have been minimal..." ²

With the Ban Ban operation still unfolding, there was pressure on our Operations Department to dispatch maximum Bells to Military Region Two for support. Therefore, on the afternoon of 1 December, I was retrieved from home to test fly Papa Foxtrot Hotel. For three hours, under brutal sunshine and residual heat radiating off the parking ramp, true to my pact with myself to produce a viable product, I labored with ground maintenance types to achieve airworthiness and a modicum of comfort for the pilot. This involved up to ten takeoffs and landings while tracking mismatched blades. The only relief from the heat was obtained during actual flight to check the results. Finally, toward the end of the day I released the machine. I still did not like the test pilot job, but had little choice in the matter.

Jarina, Fonburg, and Bevan were still upcountry flying Papa Foxtrot Gulf. They worked the Bouam Long area supporting the

¹Before the loss of Phou Nok Kok, the position had been abandoned for about nine months.

² CIA Bulletin, Laos, 12/03/70.



After seizing San Tiau on 1 December, government troops moved north toward Ban Ban.

CIA Map, 12/03/70.

slow-moving drive from that site toward the Nong Pet road junction as a diversion for the major multi-battalion surge from the San Tiau area toward Route-7. They continued the same work on Wednesday.

On Thursday morning, I deadheaded to The Alternate to replace Jarina who was then working the Ban Na area. Mike was the kind of individual who, knowing he was to be relieved, would make every effort to accommodate the incoming relief. Not everyone was similarly inclined. Keeping the same crew of Fonburg and Bevan, for the remainder of the day, we continued the supply missions in and around Site-15.

Toward evening Fonburg ferried Gulf back to Udorn while I, assigned to fly 96W with Jon Stewart and Ortillo the following morning, RON in the Air America hostel.

ALL IN A DAY'S WORK

Seasonal fog conditions in the valley persisted throughout the morning, curtailing any movement until early afternoon. At that time, we were tasked to proceed to San Tiau to conduct two Special Missions. As the enemy had reacted to the operation and moved into the valley north of Site-02, there were casualties from ground engagements. In addition to this action, areas around San Tiau were being impacted by indirect and intermittent rocket fire, likely from the large, high valley located less than four miles north-northwest. Like rockets fired into the Long Tieng bowl, these were also largely inaccurate, generally delivered in staggered sticks of three. Each rocket was programmed to launch at pre-determined intervals. Since a lucky hit might spoil one's entire day, it was incumbent on a crew to dash into a landing zone and depart without delay.

Because Jon was still undergoing training, I was authorized to log instructor time. It would be easy to milk such an

assignment for maximum compensation but, recalling the Dick Lieberth incident in 1965, when I had no clout other than a recommendation, I was resolved not to turn a man loose by himself in the mountains until I was completely satisfied that I had taught and provided him with the benefits of my experiences.³ While fulfilling my duty, I only conducted one landing, advising Jon, allowing him to fly the missions, and critiquing his efforts. He performed well.

After the fog lifted late the next morning, Jon flew most of the Customer missions. Still in an instructor status, I logged only two landings.

On the sixth, Jon experienced an actual combat event. After working a fuel load in and around the Vang Pao defense line, the Customer advised us to proceed to a landing zone at San Tiau to retrieve an unspecified number of wounded. No Special Mission was involved, just pick up WIAs and deliver them to the hospital.

While approaching the area, I contacted the forward air guide (FAG), Ruby 52, on the Victor radio channel (VHF). We relied on these individuals to apprise us of the current situation so we could decide the best method to accomplish a mission. It all depended on special trust and confidence between the ground-based person and the PIC that military bonding engendered. Aware that continued helicopter support was contingent on reliable assessments, most of the time information from a FAG was honest and forthright, but during times of extreme duress, from a cockpit perspective, one had to be very careful as to ground troops' motives.

³ Dick Lieberth, who lied about his H-34 flight time, was a very deficient helicopter pilot. After flying with him, I relayed this to management, but Company needs dictated that he be released as a Captain. He was killed in a crash on his first time in the field.

The man advised that the proposed landing zone was clear, no troops in contact, but there was still some sporadic incoming rocket fire. The unimproved pad was located in defilade at about 5,000 feet on the south side of the deteriorated strip. Since Jon was relatively naive as to the situation that confronted us, I elected to fly from the right seat. I was confident that by correctly timing my approach, like I had done on Skyline ridgeline, I could sneak unobserved into the landing pad at low level and pick up the wounded before the enemy could react. The only part of the plan that was an unknown was how much dust would be generated by the rotor downdraft and if the enemy could use this marker to focus their weapons and initiate a quick response.

While orbiting to await a lull in the incoming, I instructed Ortillo and the FAG as to the necessity of haste in the loading process, and began the approach. As the landing zone was sloped, I first paralleled the ridge and then arrived at a low hover, lightly placing my left skid against the hill and carefully easing the right skid to the ground. Troops arrived over the hill carrying three seriously wounded on crude litters. They began sliding the men into the cargo compartment. Then, while I maintained power and an exaggerated left cyclic position to hold the aircraft on the ground and prepared to conduct an immediate takeoff if necessary, uninjured, spooked troops began arriving. Without hesitation, the men jumped into the ship, senselessly trampling over their wounded buddies. Unlike an American Flight Mechanic, Ortillo seemed helpless to control the situation and maintain any semblance of order. All this business took time. It was obvious that the delay was consuming precious seconds and we needed to depart before the enemy could react and the next rocket splashed.

At our insistence, a couple of troops exited. I pulled pitch in order to stabilize the machine at a hover and check the power available in preparation for takeoff to the south. Whoa. As we left the ground, the ship began a slow death roll to the right. To forestall what would have resulted in a rollover, crash, and rotation down the mountain, I immediately slammed the machine back on the ground. When I looked to my right to assess the problem, I noticed four troopers standing on the skid. As the passenger compartment was crammed, I suppose they wanted to leave so badly they were willing to ride side saddle. With the aircraft already skewed in a right low configuration on the slope, the additional weight outside the lateral center of gravity violated all center-of-gravity (CG) vectors. This imbalance set us up for what was later referred to by Bell Helicopter as a rollover tendency, and our condition was more than enough to turn the machine over.

As more time elapsed, while we encouraged the men, who really did not need that much urging, to jump off the skid, my internal clock alarm was buzzing, causing me heartburn. After we were clear of the pad, I whisked 96W away, just in time to avoid the consequences of a rocket explosion impacting the top of the hill. I could feel the blast's residual effects, but did not believe shrapnel had hit us. As usual, during war conditions and aviation in general, events did not always evolve the way you wanted--even with prior planning. The military has an acronym for this: OBE-overcome by events.

While returning at altitude from Luang Prabang, Mike Jarina monitored my initial radio call in the blind that described my plight and asked if he could assist. I replied that I was alright, did not plan on returning to the position, nor require help. However, if he was planning on landing at my position, he would be wise to employ air cover to silence the enemy guns. Ed

Reid, who had monitored the discussion, informed Mike that he personally would not land without T-28 cover. Mike said he would land without cover, for he had a bad experience working at Luang Prabang, and the Lao T-28 pilots were more trouble than they were worth. They never attended briefings. If you attempted to talk to them, they would not listen or follow instructions. The only time Mike had used them east of the Pak Beng Valley, they flew off before the mission was complete, indicating that they had a village to bomb.

After unloading the men at Long Tieng and conferring with the Customer, I elected to ferry 96W to Udorn so the Maintenance Department could assess the undercarriage and the machine for any damage, and perform other required inspections.

Monday morning following an FCF and ferry north, we conducted more than six and a half hours (nine hours total) of useful support work. The next day was relatively unproductive. After one local fuel load, with Jon doing most of the flying, we RTB by early afternoon.

Jarina was upcountry in XW-PFJ working Site-32 in support of the unit moving toward Nong Pet. At the end of the day, he flew down to Vientiane to be in position to move south to Thakhet for a Special Mission scheduled on the ninth.

With the advent of increased Vietnamese traffic in the Panhandle and intensified U.S air interdiction to slow the supplies to South Vietnam, ground information was required to supplement the often-erroneous battle damage assessment (BDA) reported by post-strike reconnaissance. In addition, targeting from road watch teams was always favored.

To satisfy Customer and USAF requirements, Mike and his cohorts conducted a mission to the east of Lima-40 and returned to Udorn.

UDORN

I was scheduled for an early pickup on the eleventh to conduct two FCF test flights. Working with ground lead man Bob Hohman, who sported a steel plate in his head from a ground accident with a Bell in Saigon. I had a fraternity brother at Duke, who also had a metal plate in his skull, and claimed he could hear radio broadcasts when passing a station.

We first addressed Papa Foxtrot Hotel and then Papa Foxtrot Juliet, both 205s, which took almost three frustrating hours of hard work attempting to track bad blades. Although the only option available, the flag technique proved time consuming. This required many starts, shutdowns, estimated adjustments to pitch change rods, safety wiring, and a subjective flight test to judge the results of our efforts. Finally, Juliet was pulled back into the barn for extensive rotor head work.

The next morning, I was back on the ramp with Bill Hutchison for a final track of Papa Foxtrot Juliet. Finally satisfied with the product, I conducted a proficiency check, after which Bill departed north for The Alternate.

Jarina returned upcountry on the twelfth in Papa Foxtrot Gulf for all or part of six days. During that time, he exclusively supported the Site-32 area operation. This included one Special Mission.

Pilot proficiency checks were not without occasional exciting and embarrassing moments. On the 13th, Captain Jerry McEntee was conducting a local six-month proficiency ride with Captain Dave Kendall and two Flight Mechanics, N Pholawan and A Pichet. Normally a one-hour check ride began with standard maneuvers, some emergency procedures, and ended with more demanding power off touchdown autorotations to the grassy infield. As a final maneuver, Jerry initiated a 180 degree auto. The training auto proceeded normally until three feet off the

ground, when Dave over rotated. This misjudgment of height above ground resulted in a tail low hard landing, during which the blades flexed down and cut into the top of the tail pylon.

The machine was dragged back to a hangar, where the tail rotor short shaft, quick disconnect couplings, and a bent tail wheel fork were changed. Sheet metal repairs to the tail cone and pylon were effected and the rotor blades changed, and Hotel-74 was returned to service by 19 December.

S-58T

In Washington, the Company/Customer S-58T versus Bell 212 twin engine topic for our Southeast Asia operations was likely settled on the basis of initial cost and cargo compartment size, but was also biased by excellent relations that had been established with Sikorsky personnel over the years. Therefore, the decision had been made in Washington to convert five UH-34D helicopters into twin engine machines for use in Laos.

With a mandate to proceed with the project, Captain Bob Davis journeyed to the aircraft "bone yard" at the USAF Davis Monthan base near Tucson, Arizona, where USMC and U.S. Navy H34s were preserved and stored in the arid climate. Selecting the best airframes that he could find, they were prepared for shipment to Udorn. Then Bob arranged to return to Udorn, where he would assume the mantle of pilot/engineer project manager responsible for the S-58T program. ⁴

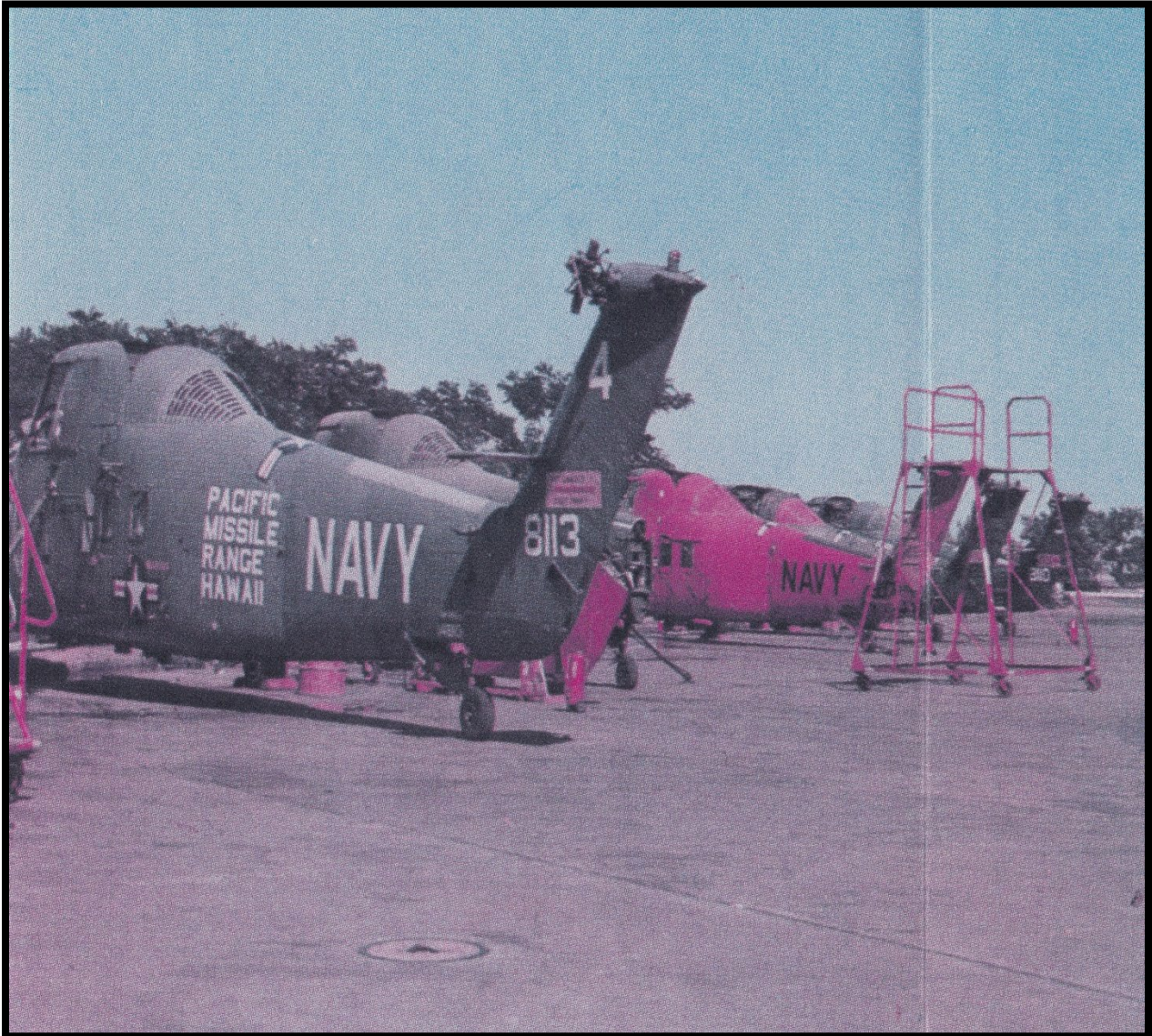
⁴ From Steve Nichols' interesting and informative book from a ground observer's perspective, *Air America in Laos: The Flight Mechanic's Stories*, 320, Nichols was selected as the S-58T maintenance superintendent. *"When the prototype was developed and ready to fly, Bob and I met George Doole at the Sikorsky plant in Connecticut to watch the first flight...Doole asked, 'Nichols, if we take delivery of the six kits, how long will it take to have them in the air?'"*

"If we have the aircraft frames, we'll have the first one in the air in thirty days and one every fifteen days thereafter."

A mix of three U.S. Marine and two U.S. Navy aircraft were delivered by USAF C-124s to Udorn on 13 December and assumed static positions on the parking ramp. A sixth aircraft was sent to the Air America maintenance facility at Tainan, Taiwan, for retrofit and special work. It had been some time since I had talked to Davis after my Washington trip, so not in the know, I was very surprised to see the kaleidoscope of machines packed tightly together waiting for the first delivery of Pratt and Whitney PT6-3 engine conversion kits. In addition, mechanics had to be trained by Sikorsky company technical representatives not yet on the scene. Since the machines had to be completely overhauled and Sikorsky conversion kits received and installed, it would be several weeks before we received our first flyable product. During that interim period, I could consider the prudence of my transition to the new machine. It would not be a precedent, for I had switched to the Bell in 1967. Although much was still unknown about the S-58T's capability, the machine was basically a UH-34D with two PT6-3 turbine engines producing 1800 shaft horsepower (at takeoff). These power plants could be perceived as a plus, for the ship would carry more payload and afford us the redundant security of two engines, especially during the long journeys over the Ho Chi Minh trails. The ship was touted as being able to fly on one power section, and I was not sure what else was planned.

Both Marius Burke and Wayne Knight were attending college at San Jose, California. One day Company CEO George Doole called wanting Marius to go the Asiatic Helicopter Convention (HAA, HAI) at the Disneyland Hotel in Anaheim, California. He was sending tickets and would arrange hotel reservations. He also said that he would call when he arrived.

Doole had not arrived by the time Marius checked in to the hotel, so he retired. The phone rang at 0200 hours. It was Doole



A mix of stripped multi-service H-34D helicopters parked on the Air America ramp at the Royal Thai Air Force base Udorn, Thailand, awaiting overhaul and conversion to Sikorsky-sanctioned S-58T aircraft.

Air America Log Volume 5, #3, 1971.

indicating that he would not be able to attend the convention, but he wanted Marius to be present at two events: a Sikorsky breakfast, followed by a Hughes luncheon. Without actually indicating that Burke should represent Air America, he implied it.

Sikorsky test pilot Wally Watkins was ferrying an S-58T to the HAI convention when he experienced fuel exhaustion and crashed in Pennsylvania. As a result, without a machine to demonstrate and for attendees of the convention to fly, the Sikorsky representatives were naturally flustered. However, the Hughes people present were very nice to Marius. They offered him a flight in the H-500 with their test pilot. Marius accepted the invitation and flew the ship for two hours.

Toward the end of the convention, high level Sikorsky officials cornered Marius eager to know his decision. Decision? Shocked and surprised, Marius asked them what exactly they were talking about. Unknown to him, Doole had previously told Sikorsky people that he would inform them about the number of S-58T conversion kits Air America would purchase when he arrived. Of course, Doole, who liked to pull tricks like this, was not present to handle the situation. Probably because of the accident and other reasons, he elected not to attend the convention. Thinking fast, Marius indicated he was not in a position to effect such a decision, whereupon the representatives became upset, almost hostile.

Wayne Knight was also asked to attend the convention, specifically to fly the S-58T. The Watkins accident precluded this, which created a great embarrassment for Sikorsky, as many people had attended the convention to see and fly the S-58T for the first time.

Like Marius, Wayne flew the H-500. Bell Helicopter also offered rides in the 212. Wayne enjoyed his two hours at the

controls, because the airfield employed was one of the USMC training fields he remembered using when stationed at MCAF Santa Ana. The experience also afforded him the opportunity to renew friendships with former Marine buddies. ⁵

During March 1971 Burke was travelling back to Udorn. While in Taipei, a message arrived from Washington: Doole wanted him to attend the S-58T school at the Sikorsky plant in Connecticut. While he was there, George called. He had to conduct a presentation on the Twin Pac to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and asked Marius to discover all he could regarding the aircraft. Marius spent two days examining everything Sikorsky had on file about the S-58T, but except for copious H-34 information, only a five-minute video existed for the S-58T. Marius then contacted Doole, informing him of the readily available H-34 info, but only the five-minute tape relating to the subject he wanted. Doole, who was known for his brevity in interpersonal relations and distaste for small talk, replied, "Yeah, I know." ⁶

⁵ EW Knight Email, 11/01/00. Before Air America closed shop in Udorn during June 1974, and Wayne departed to live in Australia, he worked with Wally Watkins. Wally told him the story of the accident and that Sikorsky modified the fuel system following the accident. However, Watkins career with the company was finished.

Knight had no influence in the Company's decision to obtain parts for the S-58T conversion.

⁶Segment Sources:
Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 386.
Telex to Washington, 12/14/70, Modest Damage to UH34 due Faulty Autorotation Landing During Proficiency Check at Udorn-Goddard.
Joe Leeker-Hotel-74.
Jack Forney Email.
Joe Leeker S-58T Information.
Marius Burke Interview at Author's House, 05/01/98.
Wayne Knight Emails, 11/01/00, 11/02/00.

THIEVERY

The morning after my Papa Foxtrot Juliet FCF Ricky went downstairs and yelled to us that both the television set and the 3000 model Zenith Trans-Oceanic radio were missing. ⁷ I discovered the screws securing the wrought iron quemoy (thief) bars to the kitchen window had been removed and were laying on the ground along with Tuie's phonograph. In addition, Ricky's two-wheeler was inside by the window, probably too large to fit through the aperture. It looked like a professional job, but one that might have been interrupted, causing the thieves to drop some of their booty. No one, including the maid who slept outside in the room beside the carport, had heard anything. I concluded the sneaky thieves must have been very quiet, as the window was right below our bedroom.

We drove to the police station to report the thefts. The officers investigated and we awaited the results. As we always locked the front gate to the yard, they indicated our maid might have contributed to an inside job. That was, of course a possibility, for I had previously misplaced my Vang Pao ring, leaving it in my soiled uniform pocket. She only returned it after Tuie remarked to her that it was bad luck for anyone to possess it but me. She had a relative, Tong, a boy who had also worked for us and now was somewhere else, but he probably knew the layout of the house and where all our items were located. The connection was not clear at the time, so we chose not to have the maid interrogated or let her go. We would just continue to closely observe her.

⁷It was the second time I had lost the radio, purchased from the Udorn U.S. Army post exchange in late 1963. A former house mouse had pawned it while I was in the States on leave.

I had United Services Automobile Association (USAA) insurance, but not nearly enough to replace the stolen items. From horror stories I had heard about previous home invasions in Udorn, I was happy no one had ventured upstairs to do us harm. Such was life in Southeast Asia. It appeared that I was somewhat safer working in a combat zone in Laos than at home.

On the same day as the theft, I wrote to the folks, providing some of the details. By month's end I received Dad's reply:

"In yours of the 13th you say you were burglarized. It is what goes on over here among the minority population all the time. Hope you can recover or get replacement from insurance. How about nailing the bars, better than screws and harder to get out?" ⁸

12/30/70 Letter from Home.

Because of huge debts and considerable dilution, our share of the Asian American and Concrete Masonry business' in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, had dwindled to a very low level. New Era Oil, a subsidiary that I was a director, was barely operating, and was not projected to be profitable for many years. Therefore, as the project seemed a complete loss, I was considering attempting to sell or write off the losses against stateside tax gains.

TONY POE

One day I encountered Tony Poe at the Air America facility. It was good talking to my old mentor, whom I had not seen for some time, since he was cashiered from Nam Yu in mid-September.

⁸My father failed to understand the extreme solidity of the dense Thai hardwood and the difficulty to penetrate it with either nails or screws.

His colorful exploits, notorious excessive drinking, and dropping rocks on enemy positions from Porters had finally caught up with him and were exposed in several media articles (*Dispatch News Service International*), first published in September. This, plus Sam Tong's alcoholic Station Manager Bill Yarbrough's interview about Tony with a rag magazine writer at Site-20 while in his cups really sealed his fate. The articles leaked fairly accurate and sensitive information regarding Agency-fostered intelligence probes into Yunnan Province from Nam Yu. Deemed too controversial to remain in Laos, Tony's increasingly high visibility, coupled with his commonly known excessive drinking, stimulated COS Vientiane to reassign him to Thailand. Considered too valuable to fire outright, as a floater, he was used in a SGU training capacity at various Thai bases.

Tony, who had advised us to purchase various securities over the years--Continental Air Lines, Walt Disney, Signal Oil and Gas, and others--had been out of the stock market for some time. However, he still had good ideas and advised me regarding Penn Central Railroad. I listened respectfully to my friend, but fortunately took no action.

Since leaving Nam Yu, Tony, together with other "old Lao hands," had engaged in training Thai troops at Pitts Camp (Camp Saritsana, fifteen miles east of the provincial capital of Phitsanulok) and other units around Prachinburi Province. At one of the camps, he had lost parts of two fingers during a demolition accident.

Pitts Camp troops consisted of mostly northern Thai, many who spoke a dialect similar to the Meo clans and who could easily be absorbed into Vang pao's forces. They were trained by U.S. Special Forces teams under the supervision of Agency people like Tony, who were familiar with operations in Laos. Funding

for the program was provided by the Agency. This covered salaries, food, death benefits, and other allowances. The agreements also stipulated assurances that Air America would supply the troops and retrieve and deliver dead and wounded personnel to Thailand.

Since Thailand bordered Cambodia and insurgency presented a continuing problem, it was in the Thai government's interest to preserve a friendly government there. Therefore, during mid-1970, Thai leaders were amenable to sending volunteer infantry battalions to Cambodia. Because of a dual language capability and ethnic ties across in Cambodia, men were recruited from areas bordering Cambodia. The units were calculated to bolster the Lon Nol regime in its attempt to protect the country from a communist takeover. The move would not constitute a precedent, for Thailand had provided men and machines for the Lao conflict since the early days of the Second Indochina War.

FOCUS ON MR-4

The political winds shifted. By September, a high-level decision was made not to dispatch Thai troops to Cambodia. Instead, by the middle of December two battalions, designated Bataillon Commando (after the French BC) 601 and 602 of trained volunteer Thai troops, led by a handful of regular Thai Army officers and Case Officer Duncan Jewell were positioned by Air America aircraft to the Bolovens Plateau, south of a Route-23 road junction near Houei Sai, located between Thateng (LS-210) and the important town of Paksong (LS-180).⁹ With defense preparations largely completed in depth, on Christmas Eve, enemy from the Saravane area commenced indirect fire on the units.

⁹ Two Paksong towns are depicted on the aeronautical map. One Site-05 is about fifteen miles north of New Paksong (LS-180), located near the Route-23/232 junction.

Unaware of who they were dealing with, the enemy continued pressure throughout the month.

During the second week in January, an elite Vietnamese unit from the 9th Regiment unwisely launched a frontal attack. Thai defenses, constructed in depth, included trenches, barbed wire, and mines that proved deadly and more than adequate. At least 137 enemy were killed at the cost of only one Thai. Anecdotal evidence had the deceased soldier surging from his bunker, attempting a Hollywood version of John Wayne or Audie Murphy.

TRIP SOUTH

A week prior to Christmas, on the advice of our wonderful medical clinic, Tuie, Ricky, Peter, Khun Yai, and I drove one hundred miles south to the regional hospital at Khon Kaen to obtain a tuberculosis vaccine (BCG) that was not available in Udorn. During the trip, the Cortina radiator boiled over or leaked. Fortunately, I was prepared for this and had brought water for just such an emergency.

Pete was out of luck, at least temporarily. The staff at the hospital had no additional vaccine in stock, and attesting to our still backwater community, were collectively surprised that medical facilities in Udorn had none.

The trip was not totally wasted. Khon Khan was a nice city, a large university and despite Gordon Murchie's USIS organization relocating there, was unspoiled by American influence. Additionally, like almost every place outside of Udorn, Cham Musagablert (Khun Yai) had relatives there to visit. The male relative owned a lumber company that manufactured tongue and groove parquet flooring. Moreover, a son had spent a year in Bergenfield, New Jersey, under an exchange program.

After a pleasant day away from hustle and bustle of Udorn, we returned without further radiator problems.

MR-2

Since we were always available and willing, Air America's participation in SAR work in Laos never ceased completely, and our crews continued to be successful retrieving the quick and the dead. On the 19th, Laredo 14, an F-4D FAC aircraft based in Udorn, was hit by groundfire in the Barrel. The crew headed south until fire in the cockpit forced the two-man crew to punch out. They were rescued by the crews of Captains Ken Wood, Ivar Gram, Bill Hutchison, Ed Reid, and Flight Mechanics Len Bevan and RS Casio.

A letter of appreciation was later forthcoming to Base Manager, CJ Abadie, from the commanding officer of the 432nd Tactical Reconnaissance Wing. It stated in part:

"...Displaying considerable initiative and aggressiveness, and with no apparent concern for their personal safety, they executed the pick-up in an unbelievably short period of time.

The responsiveness and competence of these two crews are exemplary and the humanitarian concern shown for their fellow aviators is deeply appreciated by this entire wing. On my behalf please extend a profound thanks to each participating crew member." ¹⁰

By mid-month, the Ban Ban operation, originally conceived as a quick offensive, was stalled by unseasonal rains. This, and the failure of aggressive movement, caused some individuals to suggest the venture be terminated. General Vang Pao vehemently disagreed. He feared that after being stirred up, the Vietnamese would immediately begin to attack his strongholds around Long Tieng. Moreover, his dispirited people might exercise the Sayaboury option and abandon Xieng Khouang Province. Noting that enemy logistics had not been appreciably impacted along Route-7,

¹⁰ Department of the Air Force Letter of Appreciation to the Air America Base Manager, 12/28/70.

the Agency did acknowledge the operation had diverted enough enemy to prevent them from reinforcing or capturing Ban Na.

On the 21st, Mike Jarina was scheduled upcountry in Papa Foxtrot Gulf for a one-day trip to support the Bouam Long operation. Preferring to perch in the mountains, Red Coat's unit had virtually ceased any further movement south toward Nong Pet. The diversion from that area was over.

To the east, Digger's people, after slowly probing and clearing sections of Route-7, complained about fog and a lack of continuous air support. It appeared that the war had reached such a level, whereby spoiled troops were reluctant to move toward goals without air leading the way.

By the 23rd, hundreds of men involved in the Ban Ban operation arrived at the eastern portion of the valley. Further movement uncovered a minor supply base and storage area. A one-hundred-ton rice cache was destroyed. That was largely the extent of success, for the men wanted no part of further exploration of known caches to the west. Consequently, by early January, the operation ceased.

Monday, I had spent the late morning and all afternoon testing PFJ and 96W, then Tuesday morning, I deadheaded on Peppergrinder flight 558 to Long Tieng. My purpose was to conduct a line check with the newly upgraded Captain Jon Stewart in 96W. Jon was fine and after six hours in the saddle, I RTB on 54-613.

BURMA BEN

The 24th was very active in Military Region Two. Captain Ben Van Etten, renowned star of the Burma campaign, along with new Flight Mechanic Charlie Brigham, was scheduled to fly Hotel-79 to Sam Tong, where Ben was assigned to work Requirement Office (RO) for an Army sergeant named Larry. Missions for the

day included resupply of outlying camps and outposts around Moung Soui.

Since the area was still fairly hot, Van Etten was briefed to fly at 3,000 AGL, avoid the Plain of Jars, locate the camp and proper signal of the day, and then spiral down for a quick landing.

The first mission was located at TG8160, about a mile east-northeast of the Site-108 strip. One thousand pounds of mortar rounds were stacked in the door for instant discharge. En route, a FAN red beret lieutenant chattered on his PRC-77 radio to men on the ground to expect the imminent arrival of the H-34. Ben circled overhead the camp and ascertained the correct signal was a white "VP." However, no women, children, chickens, or any other animals were observed, giving rise to intentions of spending only a few seconds on the ground.

Three seconds after touchdown a tremendous blast and concussion occurred in front of the cargo door. The pilot's entire window was jarred loose from its frame, pieces of shrapnel surged through the instrument panel and off Ben's helmet. At the same time, he felt a sharp pain in his right thigh.

Thinking Charlie Brigham must be dead, with blood dripping from his wound, Van Etten immediately pulled pitch and headed back to Moung Soui. Neither Charlie nor the lieutenant had been injured, so they helped Ben out of the cockpit and carried him to a waiting Porter for medical evacuation to Udorn. The Air America doctor looked at the wound, administered cursory first aid, and referred Ben to the USAF 432 hospital where pieces of metal were removed from his leg.

Another pilot ferried Hotel-79 to Udorn. Maintenance personnel began assessing battle damage from the DK-82

recoilless rifle that amounted to twenty entry holes in the right fuselage and fifteen exit holes.

Ben estimated that the round had landed twenty feet short of the helicopter. Any closer, he would have been history.

SAR AND A MISSING PILOT

A second incident involving Air America personnel occurred on Christmas Eve. During the afternoon, FAG Badman contacted Fast FAC Gold-86 with a requirement for a medevac. During the push to discover and destroy enemy camps in the eastern Ban Ban Valley, a number of Digger's troops had been wounded in a brief encounter with enemy troops, who were estimated to be a half mile away. This information was relayed to the Customer, who then set the wheels in motion for an emergency Special Mission.

Three Bell crews were involved. Phil Payton and Jack Knotts were in Durax 30, a generic call sign reserved for these missions. Pat Colgan and Jon Stewart crewed Durax-31. Emmet Sullivan and his cockpit mate were in Durax-32.

All Special Missions required escort planes, preferably the formidable A-1E Skyraider from the 1st Special Operations Squadron based at Nakhon Phanom. For various reasons, pilots from two A-1 flights had refused to work the same area that day. A third Sandy flight of two, led by Major Lundy, accepted the mission. ¹¹

The Bell and A-1 pilots, along with Raven-25, joined in the San Tiau area before proceeding north toward the target area, about nine miles east-southeast of Ban Ban Town. As the coordinating Victor Control ship, Caribou 392 was also involved. Then, as per SOPs, at 1700 hours, when the Bells were

¹¹ Unless acting in a SAR RESCAP capacity, Air America pilots designated A-1Es as Hobo.

approaching the valley, the Raven pilot turned mission control over to Phil Payton in Durax-30. Because of enemy proximity to the landing zone, a modicum of nervousness and heightened stress prevailed among the crews. While the two other Bell pilots orbited overhead to the west at "safe" altitudes, approaching from the south, Phil descended quickly and landed. The Flight Mechanic immediately began loading wounded. This was immediately followed by panicked troops, wanting to get out of there, and trampling over the WIAs. Unseen by the crew on the ground, Sandy Three followed the lead Bell down to establish a time-honored racetrack battle pattern, calculated to intimidate the enemy or suppress any observed groundfire. In addition, four F-4 pilots provided MiGCap duty.

At this point in the mission, confusion reigned. From the landing zone, FAG Badman heard Lundy, in Sandy Three, exclaim, "I have a rough running engine!" This was followed by, "*It's backfiring.*"

Sandy Four, "*Climb south, and I'll pick you up.*"

Lundy replied, "*I can't, I gotta get out now.*"

From his position, Sandy Four observed the ejection seat exit the cockpit and the parachute deploy. As the Sandy Three Skyraider plunged into the hillside and exploded into a ball of fire, Captain Bunker headed toward the descending parachute that appeared to be at about 1,000 feet AGL. When he arrived overhead two Bells were already orbiting the chute. Then someone stated that there was no one in the harness. The Sandy Four pilot had observed the chute slowly descending to the ground with a harness, but no one was attached to it.

From their western orbit point, Jon Stewart saw an A-1 climbing for altitude. He radioed in the blind, "*The Hobo is hit and is bailing out. The chute is out and we are following it down.*"

Hearing this radio chatter and seeing the pillar of smoke from the crash site Payton in Durax-30 departed the landing zone. He heard Jon exclaim, *"He is not in the parachute!"* Loaded with mixed wounded and non-wounded troops, unable to provide help or await the outcome, he turned south toward Site-02, and then proceeded west to Long Tieng.

Captain Emmet Sullivan, PIC of another Bell, heard a panic call, *"I'm hit! I'm hit!"* Lundy's wingman then said to turn south.

Lundy's last words were, *"I can't. I am going to have to leave it."* After he punched out, a chute deployed.

Sullivan descended thinking he was going to recover the pilot, but as he circled around the empty parachute, he received groundfire.

The two remaining Bell crews and Sandy Four circled the area for thirty minutes, but the search proved fruitless. The absence of Sandy-Three in the chute, no sign of anyone on the ground, or the wailing of an emergency beeper, dusk, and low fuel states, discouraged further SAR attempts.

Before leaving the area, Badman indicated to Bunker that troops would proceed toward the crash site by nightfall, but the presence of enemy around the crash site precluded a thorough ground search.

Christmas Eve at the Air America hostel was subdued as the Bell pilots critiqued the mission. The absence of a pilot caused them to assume he had not been strapped into the ejection seat. This was plausible, for they had heard that the harness restricted the pilot's movements in the cockpit, causing some A-1 drivers to operate without benefit of the system.

The mystery of the missing pilot deepened when crewman onboard 392 reported seeing the ejection and Major Lundy in the parachute harness. No one could logically explain the curious

sighting and the missing man, unless the orbit position and their angle skewed their observation, or Lundy had slipped out during the descent. Moreover, none of the other participants could verify this report.

Although Lundy's disposition varied between missing in action (MIA) and killed in action (KIA), based on eyewitness reports like Emmet Sullivan's, he was eventually declared KIA.¹²

Hostilities continued to impact our people, as four days after Lundy's loss, a crewman onboard a Caribou was wounded in the back during a supply drop in the vicinity of San Tiau.

The Ban Ban operation wound down without achieving major goals and concluded by the first week in January.

CHRISTMAS-A BUMMER

"I had to put my maid and her cousin in jail the other day. It seems that they have been stealing items from me and it culminated the other night with a nighttime robbery made to look like a professional job. Nothing has been recovered and I doubt that anything will, as there was a time lag before I realized who really did the stealing. Perhaps the worst loss is my Zenith Transoceanic radio, as I used to listen to the news on it. You have to be on the alert over here all the time."

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

Rick was so excited that he went downstairs about three in the morning to greet Santa. When we followed later, he was

¹² Years later, Lundy's son called me at home, soliciting information regarding his father. He referred to Durax and the incident, but as I was not a participant, and we rarely talked about a SAR in Udorn, I was unable to supply any information.

happily bouncing on a red rubber ball with the top shaped like a horse. Both children had a wonderful time opening their presents. The train set was particularly favored. Peter loved the Jonny Lighting cars. He would send a car down the sloped track and then run after it laughing. There were so many presents that I put some away to minimize breakage or loss. That part of Christmas was good, but everything changed in the afternoon...

As customary, Tuie had scheduled an outside party in the afternoon for relatives, for Thai friends, but mostly for the children. Orn and her brood arrived and I went upstairs to retrieve my camera from the green trunk. I had not used it for some time, and had a roll of film that I was saving to record the festivities.

The camera that I had purchased in Singapore was not where I left it. Bingo! Two and two makes an inside job. With the recent theft on the 13th and now this revelation, everything began to fall smoothly into place. The missing item centered on an inside job-the maid and or her male cousin who previously worked for us.

Furious, I returned to greet arriving guests and quietly inform Tuie of my suspicions. She too became very upset and confessed that she had found a hundred dollars missing from the bedroom, but knowing I would be angry, failed to inform me. Hearing this, I reflected on the small sums of money that I believed were missing from my wallet from time to time. Moreover, change that I placed in a cup rather than keep in my pocket disappeared. Then there was the "lost" Vang Pao ring incident. No, it was obvious what had unfolded over time. Someone, likely the maid's effeminate looking cousin, who took care of the boys at times, had begun pilfering small items, and when the thefts were not discovered, graduated to larger more

expensive ones. They must have thought we were really stupid and would never equate the missing articles to them.

After the previous theft, the police wanted to know if I suspected anyone. I had no proof that pointed to any specific person, and really did not want to have our servants interrogated. Now I did not care.

As more guests began arriving, apologizing we made excuses and departed for the police station to report the latest finding, our suspicions and to request a search of the cousin's home. He had not worked for us recently, but we knew where he lived.

There was much chattering and bickering at the invasion of the impoverished home that was occupied by several people. Nothing related to any robbery was discovered. Thinking I might be wrong implicating them, I began to feel guilty for bothering the people.

The police wanted to see where the camera was placed and talk to the maid, so we returned to the Benjarn Road house. While I described my actions that day, they failed to see or remark on my M-2 carbine poking from the top of the closet. Still quite suspicious of the maid after the first incident, they took the young lady to the station for further questioning.

As voiced by Broadway aficionados, the show must go on, so the party progressed. After a few drinks, I temporarily began to feel somewhat better about the depletion of my material possessions. Of course, thievery had occurred several times over the course of my tour, but it was something you never became used to.

Toward evening the maid returned to the house. Losing much face and obviously upset, she was crying and immediately went to her quarters beside the carport to pack her clothes. She could no longer be able to work for people who did not trust her. In

spite of the circumstantial evidence, I felt a pang of compassion, wondering if perhaps we had seriously blundered. We had neither identified nor apprehended a thief, and now were about to lose a fairly efficient maid; maids were never easy to replace and required extensive training. As Dang proceeded toward the gate, the cousin and his friend were milling outside yakking at us bad guys, so Et, Tuie's cousin, chased them away...

The episode was not over. The following day the maid, her boyfriend Tong, and his friend had a chance to individually tell their stories to the police investigators. All denied any part in the thefts. As I was not scheduled to fly, I remained home with the children while Tuie spent all day and most of the evening at the police station attempting to resolve the issue. Finally, after extensive interrogation, the cousin implicated the maid and her boyfriend. Then, after a little friendly persuasion from Tuie, indicating that she would not go to jail (Thai jails were definitely not places of comfort or joy), Dang confessed that Tong, his buddy, and another unidentified individual attending school in Bangkok had committed the robbery. Apparently, during the middle of the night they entered the yard through an unlocked gate separating our house from the landlord's. Then, they woke the maid in the wooden shed demanding that she unlock the back door. She refused, so they removed the window security bars. After the home invasion, she unlocked the chained front gate for them to depart with their booty.

None of the perpetrators had officially confessed to taking part in the robberies. Nevertheless, according to Thai law, probably to prevent them from fleeing, all the individuals involved (except for the phantom in Bangkok) were incarcerated, pending an early January court appearance. Dang had already been

sentenced to two months in jail for taking the Vang Pao ring. However, as she had provided information and confessed her small part in the robbery, Tuie felt obliged to petition the court for leniency. For my part, I did not believe such a short period in jail would allow a person much soul searching--not in a U.S. jail--but perhaps a Thai jail?

Court records from Chiang Mai, Tong's original residence, revealed that he was wanted by authorities there for choking an individual. I was surprised to hear this, as I never would have believed the puny, effeminate kid capable of such an aggressive act. I hoped he confessed or the court found him guilty, and he was put away for a long time. I could not abide a person like that walking around free and harboring a grudge against us.

In contemplating the incidents, the participants must have known the consequences had I caught them in the act. Tong had seen my weapons and heard me talk about what I would do to a thief.

It was too bad the episode spoiled what started out as a wonderful Christmas, but I was happy we discovered that it had been an inside job instead of one committed by professional thieves, who had a tendency toward ruthlessness, with no compunctions about committing murder.

As a precaution to future robberies, I began again chaining the Cortina to a carport support. A round was jacked into the chamber of the carbine and we were contemplating obtaining a dog and a guard for security. ¹³

Time passed and new information relating to the robberies surfaced:

¹³Information derived from a 01/05/71 Letter Home.

"The robbers are in jail for two years. [Another] one has never been brought to justice. We think it was the maid's brother who is studying in Bangkok. We feel that the money went there and is probably in his banking account. I don't know if anything will ever be done.

I don't know if I mentioned it before, but the maid's cousin stole 10,000 baht from Tuie's sister [Orn]. This occurred when we were in Bangkok having Rick's tonsils out. Tuie's mother was at our house caring for Peter. They went home for some reason and this boy went too. The money was discovered missing and no one could figure out who took it. After the other business cropped up we figured the boy also took the sister's money. This was all confirmed, but nothing has been recovered..."

[03/12/71 Letter Home.]

REID

During the very early days when minor battle damage to a helicopter during the low intensity conflict was considered a badge of courage by most pilots, Captain Ed Reid, usually in his cups when off duty, bragged that he had never been hit by groundfire. Aside from being hyperbole, an individual should never say never while flying in a combat environment. Moreover, no one working in that Lao caldron long escaped the inevitable.

Not having children with him in Udorn, as per standard policy, Ed was normally tapped for upcountry work during the Christmas period. The day after Santa's arrival, he was working Papa Foxtrot Juliet around Ban Na, in an area still contested by both parties. While terminating a sling load approach to a 5,700-foot pad northeast of Site-15 at TG875380, a shot rang out from the right quadrant. The small arms round penetrated the fuselage and a stringer before bouncing off the pilot's armored

seat. As Ed was bending over to look at the drop zone, the projectile narrowly missed hitting him. ¹⁴

Already at a ten-foot hover, he immediately pickled the load and pulled excessive pitch to depart. In doing so, he estimated that the engine had been overtemped to 645 degrees. ¹⁵

Aware that an over temperature had occurred that required a hot end inspection, and sheet metal repair was necessary, Ed wisely ferried Papa Foxtrot Juliet to Udorn.

UNPLEASANTNESS

The 27th marked a full day of FCFs with lead Bell ground mechanic Bob Hohman and an unfortunate transformation in my relationship with lead ground mechanics, while attempting to track two Bells. First on the agenda was Papa Foxtrot Juliet, which overnight had been repaired and inspected for compressor wheel damage. After wrestling with the machine for an hour and twenty minutes, including ten landings, I released it.

Then I began working on Papa Foxtrot Gulf. This proved a very difficult and frustrating machine to track to an acceptable level. Still in the dark ages as to maintenance procedures, we had previously attempted to use an electronic tracking device, but it never seemed to work right, or personnel simply did not operate it properly. Too complicated to install, never working right, there was always some excuse for not using one, so the tracking process always reverted to the manual tracking flag

¹⁴ Ed's early luck changed. In later years a Customer had been previously wounded onboard Reid's ship and subsequently died, while on a mission well east of Savannahket.

¹⁵ As the immediacy of such a tenuous situation dictated instantaneous action, a pilot could easily underestimate instrument readings and might notice a needle descending through the red arc. Irrespective of the claimed over-temperature, there was no mention of a high torque setting that was detrimental to the drive train.

people were more familiar and comfortable with. As mentioned before, this method was time consuming, for after each track the blade tips had to be statically marked with different colors. The red tracking device consisted of a large iron pole fitted with two horizontal iron protrusions. Between these lateral arms a two-foot-long bungee cord was wrapped with paper masking tape. The process involved carefully moving the flag into a whirling rotor disc path to obtain a "hit" on the masking tape. Then, after the aircraft was shut down, the resulting colored marks were compared to see if and how far the blade track strikes differed. An optimum mark was one where marks overlapped or were no more than a thumb's width apart. Even this criterion was not perfect. Seemingly not logical, sometimes the blades had to be placed slightly out of track to obtain a smooth flight.

The process was not as simple as it sounded, and required care and some expertise by ground crews. The helicopter was shut down and after the blades stopped, and the flag marking viewed, the designated mechanic climbed on top of the fuselage deck to adjust the pitch change link nuts, called flats, a small amount. This was a hit and miss operation requiring experience and skill from the worker. After the jam nuts were safely wired, a short flight was necessary to ascertain if the vibration level exceeded the inherent two per revolution vibration and was acceptable. Of course, this was entirely subjective and relied on the pilot at the controls. Muddying the waters, Udorn was about six hundred feet above sea level, the aircraft carried no payload, and as the test was not performed at the high altitudes we flew and worked upcountry, any acceptable vibration level was purely a judgment call.

Depending on the test pilot's perception, the process could start over again. Mark the blades, place another layer of masking tape on the bungee cord as needed, pilot start the

aircraft, when the RPM was at the prescribed level and rotor disc level, tilt the flag into the blades, shut down, and begin again.

Most of the time it was a losing battle, for excessive vibrations could stem from many sources beside blades. Worn trunions, swashplate, transmission mounts, and myriad of other items--any one or a combination could contribute to a problem. That was the curse of an older machine with so many moving parts.

Finally, after several hours and twenty landings, during which other lead mechanics like Stanly Shim and Jimmy Schultz accompanied me on the test flights, hot and bothered, we quit and the ship was pulled back into the barn.

Very unhappy, and with considerable pressure to produce a machine for upcountry work, the top mechanics went to the CPH to complain about me. To my knowledge they did not go behind my back, and I was present during the discussion. Not intimidated, I frankly informed everyone present that I really did not want the damn test pilot job, and that I was not going to release a ship that I deemed unfit for upcountry work. Pushing unsatisfactory aircraft on pilots to satisfy Customer requirements had gone on too long over the years. Nothing was settled at this meeting, except to ruffle everyone's feathers. The head of our Bell program, Dick Lister, was present during the confab and offered to fly with me to judge and possibly help with my test procedures. He had a lot of Bell experience, was a respected Bell pilot, and a likeable person, so I agreed to a flight. I learned absolutely nothing during the flight, except that I was not the problem. Of course, I was the whipping boy instead of the aging airframes and a lack of new parts. I was retained in my instructor pilot/test pilot billet, but my former

rapport with the ground people never achieved the same level as before.

Early Monday morning I returned to the flight line, attempting to produce an airworthy Papa Foxtrot Gulf. It was the same drill: track, shut down, start up, fly. This went on for hours until, feeling a little intimidated and cowed by the confrontation the day before, despite reservations, I finally acceded to release the machine.

Following lunch in the Club dining room, I conducted a semi-annual proficiency check with Ed Rudolfs. The machine still did not feel right to me, and I constantly asked Ed for his opinion. Since the blades turned counter clockwise, causing more of a vertical vibration for anyone sitting in the left seat, this was a difficult judgment. Scheduled upcountry, we launched north. South of Vientiane, before reaching the Mekong, Ed said he could not take the vibration level any longer and was going to be sick if we proceeded. I agreed and turned around.

After writing the problem up in the logbook, I talked the situation over with maintenance and operations. I am not sure if anyone actually believed me, but that was the state of things.

Of course, I was vindicated when a cracked transmission mount was discovered. Like the tail wagging the dog, it was not clear whether the vibration caused the crack or the crack caused the vibration. However, I do not recall anyone apologizing or commending me for possibly avoiding a catastrophic event in the field; it was part of my job.

Wednesday morning, I was back in the Barrel beginning with a long FCF session with Papa Foxtrot Juliet. By afternoon, after extensive repairs, Papa Foxtrot Gulf was again on the ramp. I worked until very late breaking in a new transmission, and tracking the stubborn machine. Although it was still not in an airworthy condition to satisfy me, I went home.

Someone else worked on Gulf the next morning, and by early afternoon Bennie Shaffer and I were on the way north for work and RON at The Alternate. I had to admit that the machine felt better and we were able to gainfully execute a fuel load that included fifteen landings.

Mike Jarina, also at Long Tieng flying Papa Foxtrot Hotel on the 29th, had worked on the waning operation at Site-02 and at Bouam Long. While we came up from Udorn on Thursday, Mike was assigned to work bolstering defenses at Site-63.

Ellis Emery joined us on New Year's Eve, on a day when I flew thirty landings. Also remaining upcountry, Jarina worked the Site-32 area. ¹⁶

THAILAND IN FOCUS

"Historically, the interests of the Vietnamese communists have extended beyond the Mekong to northeast Thailand. During the French Indochina War, the Vietnamese communists drew on the

¹⁶ Segment Sources:

Mike Jarina Interviews and Flight Time Report.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 267, 284-285.

Bill Leary, January 1971 Notes: U.S Senate Subcommittee Reports that Thai Troops are being trained....

Morrow, *The Washington Post*, *CIA-Backed Laotians Said Entering China*, 01/26/71.

Bill Leary 1971 Notes, Interview with Former Chief of Station Vientiane Hugh Tovar and Case Officer Mike Ingham.

Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 386-387.

Van Etten Article regarding the incident provided to the Author.

12/24/70 Air America XOXO Regarding Hotel-79 Incident-Goddard.

12/25/70 Air America Flight Information Center Activity Report, Hotel-79.

Jack Knotts Interview.

Emmet Sullivan Interview.

Task Force Omega, an Account of the SAR in Which Al Lundy was Downed on 12/24/70-Although the end result was the same, accounts vary depending on the participants.

Air America XOXO, Incident Report Papa Foxtrot Juliet-CPH Goddard, 12/26/70.

Air America Flight Information Center Activity Report XW-PFJ, 12/27/70.

support of the Vietnamese who had settled in this region for war supplies.

By 1970 [and even before], there was plentiful substantiated evidence that North Vietnam and China were supporting the development of insurgency in Thailand and making use of the territory of Laos for this purpose. Cadres from Thailand who had received training in North Vietnam and China passed through Laos on their way to Thailand, where they recruited new adherents. These men were trained at special camps in Laos under the supervision of North Vietnamese and Chinese instructors. A network of support bases had also been set up inside Laos along the border with Thailand. The security of the training camps, support bases and infiltration routes used for passage across the border was provided by Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese Army forces."

Royal Thai Government efforts throughout the year to counter stabilize, if not totally eradicate communist insurgency in various parts of the Kingdom during the year, met with measured results.

SOUTH

In the deep south, on the Thai western peninsula bordering Malaysia, more pressure was brought to bear on the communist terrorist organization (CTO). By January, in response to citizen complaints regarding the 1300-man CTO, the Communist Suppression Operations Directorate (CSOD) established a headquarters to assume security measures in the south.

Patrolling resulted in some contacts, and by March Thai security forces accidentally discovered a major CTO base. This resulted in a battle in which many terrorists eluded capture.

A bilateral agreement was signed with Malaysia allowing military forces cross border privileges for a maximum of 72 hours when in hot pursuit.

By May, the border situation had improved, evidenced by lower CTO activity. In addition, several insurgent bases had been eliminated.

The situation in the mid-south region of Phatthalung 333 Province was unsettled with police reduced to wearing civilian clothes and officials unable to travel to outlying villages.

NORTH

Activity from an estimated 1,600 insurgents in remote north and north central areas of Nan and Chiang Rai Provinces increased in late February when a road-construction crew in eastern Nan Province near the Lao border was ambushed. Five workers were killed, along with five border policemen assigned to security. More casualties were incurred while attempting to recover construction equipment.

In response to the February attack, and reports that insurgents were attempting to seize and administer regional villages, during early April, the government reacted. Heavy air and artillery strikes were followed by an army clearing action. During the heavily contested operation two RTA helicopters were shot down and several government base camps overrun, resulting in numerous casualties.

In late August 1970 the Royal Thai Government achieved success when a 450-man Royal Thai Army unit conducted a series of raids against insurgent strongholds in northern Nam Province. Benefitting from past failures, this coordinated operation totally surprised the enemy. It included movement at night with helicopter support and assistance from intelligence teams in Laos.

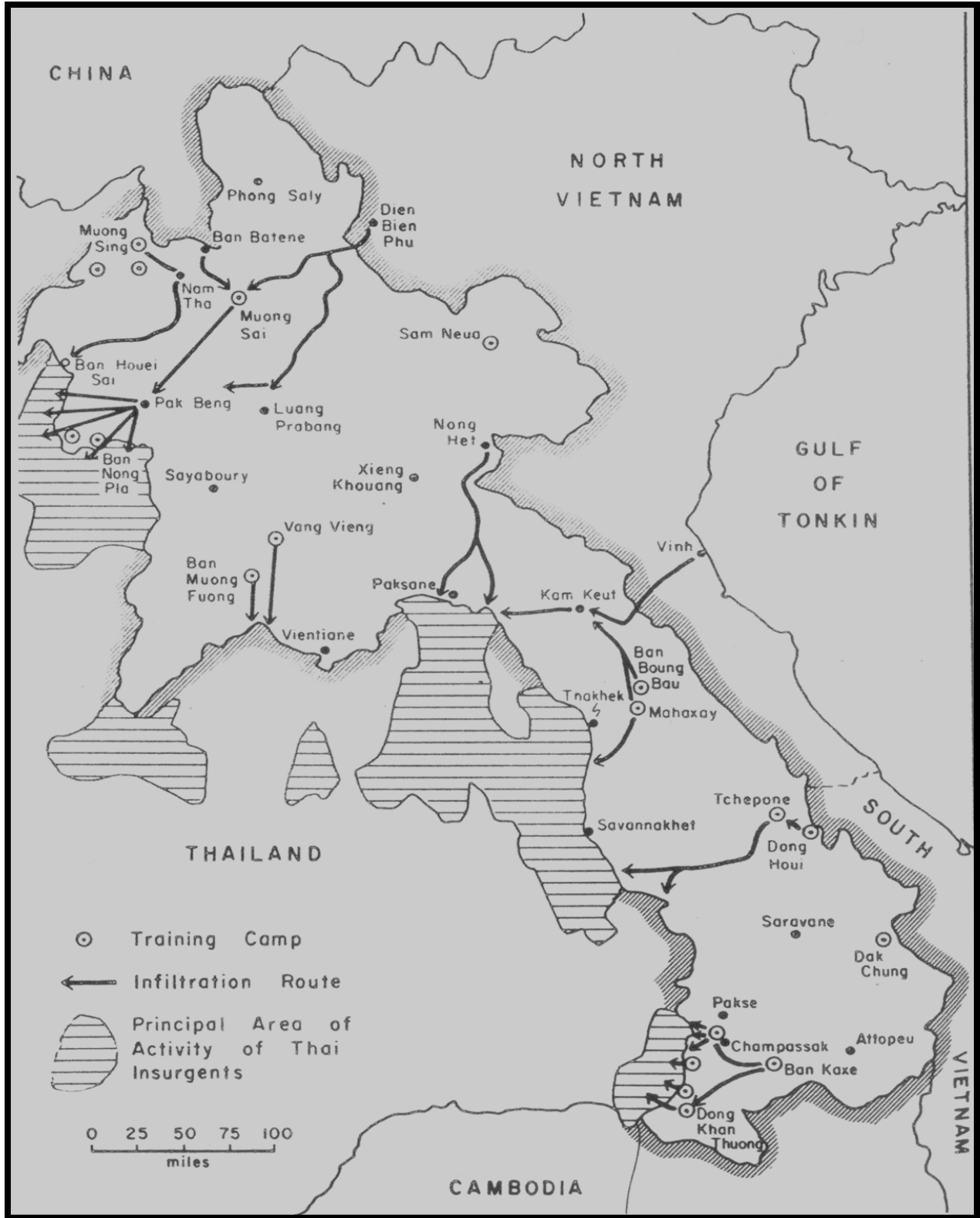
ISAN

By spring, insurgents had been making progress in the northeast. Assassinations and armed propaganda meetings had increased over a few months. This was rendered easier by some Thai units being extracted from counterinsurgent operations because of negative developments in Laos, especially around Long Tieng. Moreover, there was concern for southeast border regions where communists were making advances in north and west Cambodia. Over time, lessening pressure on insurgents, seven army companies were rotated from duty in Isan to the Cambodian border. By the fall Thai Army CI forces had been reduced to less than 1,000 troops with orders to engage only in emergency suppression efforts.

During early September intelligence concluded that the insurgency movement in the northeast continued to rebound from setbacks in 1967-1968. However, most of the activity was deemed organizational and village support network rather than military in their operating areas.

By then, communist movement was noted in eight provinces with Nakhon Phanom Province the most active. For the first time, a secure base was established in the Dulong Luang area. Reputedly, AK-47 rifles had been brought into the region from Laos and insurgents formerly training in China and North Vietnam were returning. In spite of increased capabilities, CI avoided actions that would stimulate a strong Thai reaction. Instead, they were tailored toward low key events that would lull Bangkok leaders into believing the CI effort in the northeast was waning. During 1970 Thailand's politics were in flux:

"After seven years of unimaginative but steady leadership, Prime Minister Thanom is now clearly on the way out.



Thailand insurgent infrastructure and infiltration routes into Thailand from Laos and North Vietnam.

Dommen

Thanom has been a casualty of his own style of leadership and of problems at home and abroad which he, or any Thai prime minister has only limited control. the old Sarit way of ruling [by decree and martial law] is not appropriate for the tough decisions the country now faces...Thanom has been unable to whip his political opponents in the parliament and those in his government into line. Policy over Cambodia has created division in the leadership and undermined public confidence on the issue.

Thanom has promised to give up his post as supreme commander of the Thai armed forces when he reaches 60 in October 1971. One would think he would retire from prime minister also, but forces might cause him to continue until the next elections scheduled in early 1973 when he has promised to step down.

If Thanom leaves office early, leadership would almost certainly pass to Deputy Prime Minister, Praphat, long the most powerful figure in the government. Prahpat's ascension would be opposed by many elements of Thai society, including the monarchy and its supporters. These elements would see Praphat's elevation as signaling a retreat from the goal of a constitutional government with representative institutions." ¹⁷

STRATEGY

Washington's Indochina policy was influenced by additional U.S troop withdrawals from the Theater, Vietnamization, negotiations with the North Vietnamese in Paris, and

¹⁷ Dommen, Arthur *Conflict in Laos: Politics of Neutralization*, NY, 1964 361.

CIA Weekly Summary, 9, (cia.ucia.gov/scrips/cgiserv).

Weekly Summary.

Weekly Summary, 8, 05/15/70.

CIA Weekly Summary, Thai Insurgency, 5, 09/11/70.

Weekly Summary, 4, 12/23/70.

Weekly Summary, Thailand: A Period of Transition, 5, 12/02/70.

particularly intelligence reports indicating initiation of North Vietnamese Army operations in South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos before the end of the dry season. Therefore, operations were proposed, tailored, and approved to provide the South Vietnamese government additional time to develop a more effective military force and achieve a modicum of political stability.

"By mid-December 1970, Laos was clogged with men and supplies, the bulk of which would be moved into Cambodia for a 1971 spring offensive."

Richard Nixon.

By late 1970, despite years of random bombing, the enemy logistic route through Laos had been highly refined into a sophisticated transfer system. Based on evidence of increased Vietnamese manpower and equipment having entered Laos, and enemy dry season offensives throughout the region, contingency planning went forward to encompass a major South Vietnamese operation to strike at the heart of the enemy logistic center. Supported by U.S. air, the campaign, later known as Lam Son 719, was calculated to invest and sever the Route-9 Panhandle lines of communication and attack the Tchepone storage center in order to halt, slow, or disrupt military supplies moving into South Vietnam. Such a preemptive operation would also test the capability of the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) to conduct a major military intervention with only U.S. air assistance and no support from U.S. ground troops or advisors.

The prospect of severing the Trail was certainly not a new issue. It had been proposed in 1965 and endorsed by General Westmoreland and some congressmen, but was tabled at the time as being too ambitious, mainly requiring great numbers of nonexistent U.S. troops. Now, with enemy infiltration through Laos becoming an even greater problem, because of geopolitical

circumstances, it would have to be addressed by greater air emphasis and ground force penetration.

Still mired in semantics and the planning stage, the bold operation would have to await the following year to come to fruition. This posed the question. Would it become a situation of too little, too late?

Although the "die had been cast," the basis for the situation and justification for a cross border operation was later summarized in an explanation to Congress:

"Southern Laos became critical to Hanoi after the Allied Cambodian operations deprived it of the port of Sihanoukville and their border sanctuaries. They [the NVA] swelled their forces in the area by more than 25,000, captured the towns of Saravane and Attopeu, and intensively built up their supplies and their logistics network. Whereas for years southern Laos had been central to Hanoi's operation in northern South Vietnam, at the end of 1970 it was becoming the hub and crossroads of Hanoi's campaign throughout Indochina. Almost all of its men and supplies were now flowing through this [Panhandle] area...Hanoi deepened the area's part in the Vietnam War, with direct implications for Vietnamization and our withdrawals." ¹⁸

GENERAL OVERVIEW

My ninth year in Southeast Asia was complete. Working in Laos had been relatively busy and extremely exciting at times. In Military Region Two, my main area of work, we still

¹⁸ FRUS, Press Release, Office of the Historian, 09/08/10.
United States Army Aviation Digest, July 1986, Jim Fulbrook, Part 2: The Battle, 36.
FRUS, #87, 12/11/70, Summary of Conclusions of a Meeting of the Washington Special Actions Group, Indochina Contingency Planning.
Clay, *CHECO*, Lam Son 719.
President Nixon's February 1971 Report to Congress, 129-130.

maintained our Long Tieng base and held fairly strong defensive positions to the north and on the east and west flanks of the base. However, intangibles loomed in the near future, like enemy plans for the dry season, and diminishing U.S. Airforce support. Whatever lay in store for us in 1971 was sure to prove interesting for all parties. ©

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EPILOGUE

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