

**RICE, ROOFTOPS, AND  
REFUGEES**

**AIR AMERICA, INC.**

**BOOK FOURTEEN**

**1973**

**BUDDHIST ERA 2516**

**YEAR OF THE OX**

Harry R. Casterlin



Air America Cap emblem



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## INTRODUCTION

**T**hus began my eleventh and next to final year of an interesting, challenging, and financially rewarding experience flying helicopters for Air America, Inc. in Laos. With geopolitics and the military balance of power dramatically changing in Southeast Asia, January commenced with the general expectation of a successful ceasefire agreement between the United States Government (USG) and North Vietnam (Democratic Vietnamese Republic-DVR) in Paris that would act as a catalyst and precursor to a similar agreement for the Kingdom of Laos. <sup>1</sup> In anticipation of such an agreement, both the Royal Lao Government (RLG) and Vietnamese (DVR) leaders earnestly sought to capture select territory that could be employed as future bargaining chips during ongoing negotiations between the Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS) and government officials in the Lao administrative capital of Vientiane. <sup>2</sup>

For the Royal Lao Government (RLG) and long-suffering, war-weary Royal Lao Army (RLA), Meo, Kha, and other tribal warriors involved in the conflict, the situation still entailed a consuming struggle for survival. In Military Region Two, aided by Thai "volunteers," the defense of the Long Tieng base and its long, colorful history presented a primary obstacle to the North

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<sup>1</sup> The fate of Laos always depended on the military outcome in South Vietnam.

<sup>2</sup> Neo Lao Hak Sat (acronym NLHS): The political portion of the North Vietnamese backed communist movement in Laos. The Pathet Lao (PL) or Free Lao was the military arm. Both were influenced by and surrogates of North Vietnamese leaders. *Asia (1973) [Back in Time] World Book Online American Edition. "The [two] princes of Laos [In February] finally agreed on a truce and a provisional government that would give some respite to their war-shattered nation. But Khmer [Cambodia] and Vietnam were still consumed with civil war despite various ceasefire agreements."*

## INTRODUCTION

Vietnamese Army (NVA) in discouraging the RLG and Major General Vang Pao's Meo soldiers from continuing their long war of attrition.<sup>3</sup>

The New Year also marked the Author's continued and expanded participation in the AB-1 Agency-supported, funded, administered, and Air America civilian employee-conducted Special Project program. The extremely challenging night work was designed to implement clandestine intelligence gathering by electronic devices conceived and developed at the CIA's Langley, Virginia high-technology laboratory. The newly developed devices employed, and difficult work included James Bond type gadgets and innovative methods that included "stranger than fiction" stimulating night missions. For the small number of participants in the Special Project, the program required total dedication, concentration, and a high level of proficiency. While these Agency missions kept the Author away from the still-hazardous front lines, the clandestine work entailed penetrating deep into enemy territory, and it presented entirely new dangerous and exceptionally challenging situations.

In addition to the ongoing war that had lately eliminated so many of our fine employees, for the pilot group of the Far East Pilot Association (FEPA) in Southeast Asia, the year commenced without a new work agreement. Paramount to the continued operation, our jobs and livelihood would depend on the outcome of contentious negotiations with the Company.

As in previous books, Volume Fourteen of the Author's anthology of the Second Indochina War in Laos contains numerous facets that most authors would likely be loath, and seriously challenged, to address in depth. Mostly eyewitness, the accounts

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<sup>3</sup> Long Tieng was officially established as a major Meo logistic and training base in the fall of 1962. During many years in the Theater, the Author spent the major portion of his Lao upcountry time living and working out of Long Tieng.

## INTRODUCTION

are compiled from part history, part autobiographical memoir, part pilot, Flight Mechanic, and other participants' recall, and part reflection. Although not intended to be a detailed history, abundant information is included from documented material.

The book is a continuation of the Author's attempt to produce a valid and reliable narrative describing years of constantly accelerating conflict in Southeast Asia, years that he spent with others participating in the hazardous Lao airspace as a seasoned Air America combat helicopter pilot.

Since much previous history and information leading up to 1973 is only casually addressed in the current book, it is strongly recommended that the reader consult the Author's preceding books, or at least the 1971 and 1972 issues for background and a more comprehensive reference to the war.

Like all the books in the Author's *Rice, Rooftops, and Refugees* <sup>4</sup> series, seeds for the collection were sown and began to slowly germinate while working for Air America, Inc. from September 1962 until June 1974. Largely because of Company constraints (threats of termination with cause) regarding snapping photographs, taking notes, and maintaining diaries, except for logged flight time and crewmembers, no attempt was made by the Author to record day to day operations or eventful episodes. Therefore, many anecdotes are lost to the dustbin of history. Fortunately, other participants did not feel as duly intimidated, or else valuable, indispensable black and white and color photographs of the era would not have been preserved for posterity. Since we were cautioned not to converse about the war or what was occurring upcountry (a term used for Laos on our time off), as a catharsis to dissipate emotional stresses of repressing such items, I forwarded semi-detailed letters

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<sup>4</sup> As reported in previous books, credit goes to Mike Jarina for this title.



## INTRODUCTION

regarding certain aspects of the war to my parents. Assuming that my letters were being monitored and scanned, my communications were necessarily sanitized, essentially innocuous as to detailed matter, dealing with gross generalizations and accounts of some momentous incidents in which I participated. As the years progressed, despairing of retaining reliable and valid information relating to my job for posterity, I began a cautious and low-key effort to better detail events and snap photographs.

In 1985, close friend and former Air America helicopter pilot Chuck Frady lent the Author a book published by English author Christopher Robbins regarding Air America. The "history," or account, appeared to be quite well researched, but some personal recollections were obviously gleaned from "Johnny-come-lately" individuals possessing little tenure with the Company. They were necessarily skewed, and provided insignificant knowledge of the actual situation. <sup>5</sup> Disappointed with the relatively poor attempt to describe our participation in an important era during the Cold War, and unaware of the enormous task ahead, I resolved to create a more detailed and accurate account of Air America helicopter operations, their crewmembers, and the Second Indochina War in Laos from a personal viewpoint.

Even without tangible records, except flight logs and Crewmember Duty Reports from which to draw information, much of my participation during the early era was indelibly burned into my long-term memory banks-hence, never to be forgotten. Recall was further jogged by extensive research, and was expanded and

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<sup>5</sup> Christopher Robbins book, *Air America* was the basis for the movie by the same name. Attempts by Air America personnel to aid the scriptwriter with accuracy met with failure. The script was purportedly rewritten two times and eventually resulted in an action packed, colorful, but historically inaccurate film that failed to do well at theater box offices.

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culled by what was often discovered as distorted or biased recorded history.

As a result, years after termination of the Second Indochina War, I found myself relating detailed war stories to selected friends and family. The recipients, generally others with Vietnam War experience, considered the narratives interesting and informative. This tended to stoke and encourage my enthusiasm to create something tangible, worthwhile, and enduring for readers, researchers, and military history aficionados.

Except for an excellent education at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, I possessed little previous experience writing lengthy tomes. First, I had to thoroughly research available literature about Laos and Thailand in order to enmesh myself in all facets of the countries' cultures and politics. This was followed by laboriously assembling outlines and accounts in my largely unintelligible longhand. Before too long, due to the enormity of the project, it was evident that an improved, more efficient system would be required. A Smith Corona word processor helped move the project forward, but the state of the art at the time limited the amount of material that could be stored on expensive disks. Moreover, to my frustration and chagrin, I found that an errant stroke on the keyboard could easily wipe out a month's work.

When the Author transitioned to a bona fide home computer, assembled, maintained, and periodically upgraded by son Peter Townsend Casterlin, the door opened wide to allow more thorough research and record all information and detail required to relate a complete story. Consequently, what had originally been intended as a single book morphed into multiple volumes, individually covering each succeeding year of the Second Indochina War in Laos. I generally write each morning when my

## INTRODUCTION

mind is fresh, and after more than three decades devoted to writing, my long-suffering wife still refers to this project as the "**never-ending book.**" At times, I believe she might be correct.

As in previously non-published works, the Author draws heavily on information contained in letters to parents or friends, personal log books, photographs, the Internet, and memory to produce pertinent narrative. Photos and maps from the Author's personal collection, friends' input, and other documented sources are liberally employed to help explain or expand understanding of various situations.

Serving to preserve, supplement, and enhance the linear storyline, particularly when the Author was absent from the battlefield, Internet Email, the Google website, verbatim CIA Daily Bulletins, peer interviews, and other principals are also included.

Sadly, many former peers and participants in the Second Indochina War are no longer available to query, and our group is diminishing each year.

In order to fill certain voids in narrative, maintain consistency, and a cohesive flow to the story, other writers' efforts are employed where deemed useful. These are duly footnoted or documented when possible and deemed necessary to uphold copywrite laws.

Crosschecking information regarding events, or participants' recall of the conflict that I used in the past has become extremely difficult at this stage in life. However, most of the core research and collection of comprehensive notes was conducted and recorded by the Author decades before, and stored in yearly folders for later composition. Still, true research never ends. As additional information continues to surface

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pertaining to valid aspects of the war, editing is deemed essential in order to complete a comprehensive story.

Finally, in the scope of kudos, the Author would like to acknowledge and applaud both the ground and air contributions of the multi-national civilian men and women of Air America, Inc., Bird and Son (B&S), and Continental Air Services, International (CASI). This accolade also includes dedicated members of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), U.S military services, and associated USG and civilian agencies (USAID, USIS, IVS, religious orders, etc.), and lastly third country nationals-- Chinese, Filipino, and Thai--who participated in the Second Indochina conflict in Laos, often as a "face-in-the-crowd" during the lengthy and largely frustrating Soviet-American Cold War era.

For those whose names failed to make the final cut-RIP.

HRC



Southeast Asia and the door key shaped kingdom of Laos, with its twelve provinces sandwiched between Thailand, Burma, China, Vietnam, and Cambodia.

**W**ith the holiday season over, early January portended to be a busy month for those of us flying in Southeast Asia. Ceasefire negotiations that would affect the Southeast Asian wars and civilian and military participants in both South Vietnam and Laos continued between interested parties in Paris and Vientiane. At the same time, Air America Company representatives from Taiwan and pilot representatives of Far East Pilot Association (FEPA), drawn from stations in Udorn, Vientiane, Saigon, and Okinawa, reconvened to resume stalled contract negotiations. Both of these discussion sessions, the first pertaining to geopolitical issues, the other business, had serious implications that would eventually affect our vocations.

The family and I returned from a short post-Christmas vacation in Bangkok. Except for a local two-hour proficiency flight with Hank Edwards (Date of hire 07/19/66) and Deak Kennedy (DOH 10/24/70) on the third in S-58T Papa Hotel Bravo, I did not resume flying the line until the eighth.

His Royal Highness, Crown Prince Vachiralonghorn, making his first visit since his investiture ceremony on 28 December, arrived in Udorn on the fourth. Many decorations in the form of colorful arches proclaiming "Long Live the Crown Prince," were erected at the RTAF gates and around town to honor him. These structures included participation from Chinese and Vietnamese ethnic groups living in Udorn. When the Crown prince was ready to leave for Bangkok after two days, the governor's wife arranged to have several Thai girls meet and pay respects to him prior to his departure. On the sixth, I drove Tuie, Jarawan

(Jarun, the town's veterinarian's wife), and son Ricky to the airfield to conduct a presentation of flowers. <sup>1</sup>

## **JARINA IN MR-2**

Captain Mike Jarina was still in the field. <sup>2</sup> On the first, flying 35 Foxtrot, a 204B Bell helicopter, Mike, Captain Cliff Hendrix (DOH 09/30/70), and Flight Mechanic Israel (DOH 09/23/67) departed north from Wattay Airport Vientiane for the Meo Long Tieng base. Jarina and his crew logged nine hours and five minutes hours and remained overnight (RON) in Vientiane. <sup>3</sup>

Commanded by General Vang Pao, Long Tieng was an important government base located in the southern mountains of Military Region Two's (MR-2) Xieng Khouang Province. <sup>4</sup> Formed as an irregular force military training base, it was established in the fall of 1962. Transferring operations from Phou Kao for greater aircraft availability and safety, the valley was largely founded with Agency advice and funds to garrison and train volunteer Meo tribal people for guerrilla warfare operations against the communists. The base was also generically known to flight crews as The Alternate. For messaging and logbook recording purposes, the site had three listing in the Flight

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<sup>1</sup> *Air America Log*, Volume 7, #4, 1973.

<sup>2</sup> Former UH-34D and Bell helicopter Captain Mike Jarina was an excellent source of information for the Author's books, from the time of his arrival to Air America in mid-1965. Conducting many interviews at Jarina's home in Milton, Florida, the Author found Mike's recall outstanding. Additionally, his logbooks and photos greatly supplemented and added narrative to the story during periods when the Author was not upcountry or performing flight duties in other aircraft or regions.

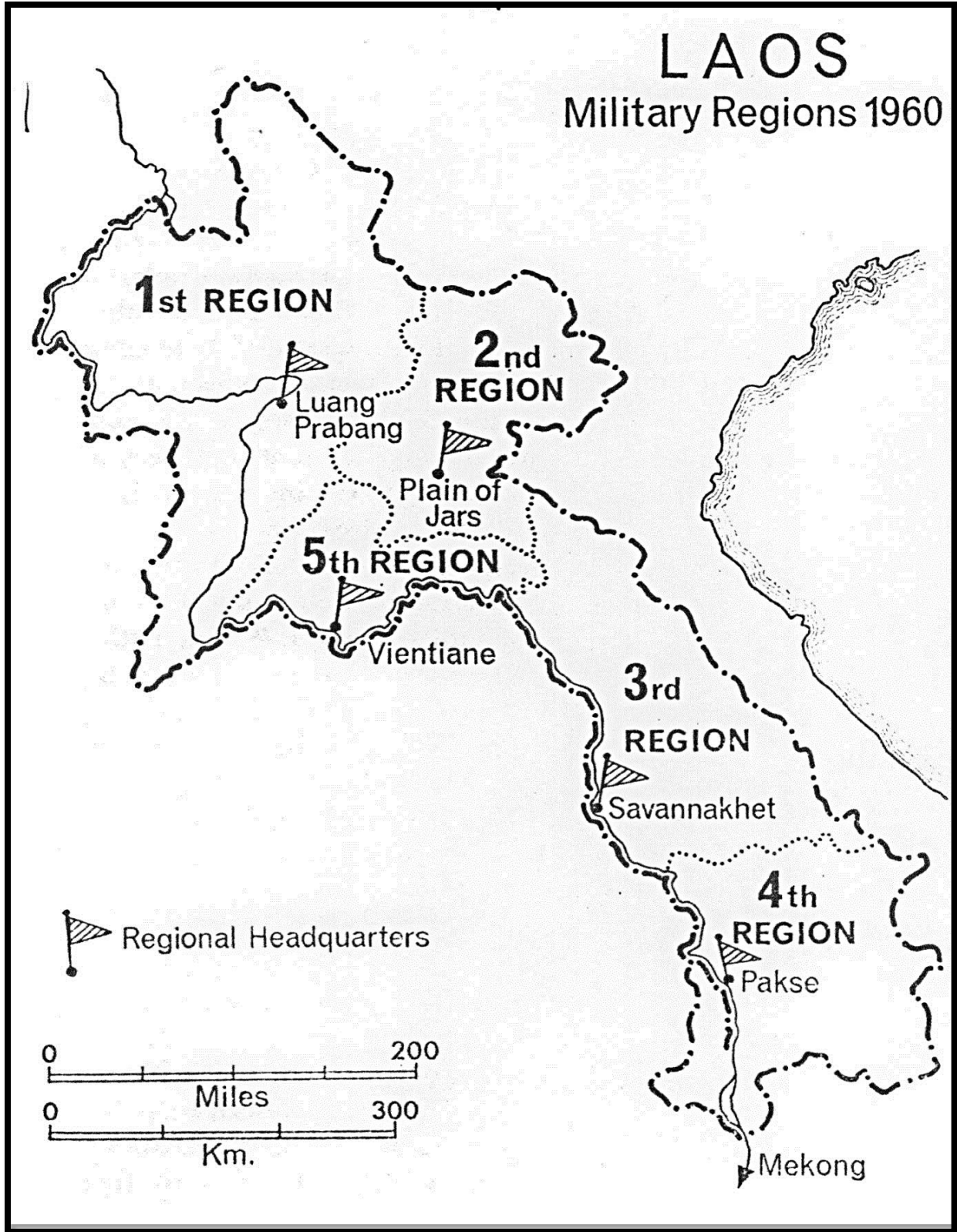
<sup>3</sup> RON: A commonly used acronym for "remain overnight" at an out station.

<sup>4</sup> Military Region (MR): Starting from the northern portion of the country there were five designated military regions generally aligned along topographical and political boundaries.



Located deep in the mountains of northern Laos, the well populated Long Tieng Valley is seen from overhead a northern ridgeline.  
Author 1973 photo Collection.





The five designated military regions of Laos stretching from north to south.

Information Center (FIC) Air Facilities Data book for Laos as Lima Site-30, Lima Site-20A (LS-20 Alternate) or Lima Site-98 (LS-98). LS-20A was the most common usage. Although the site was depicted on current aeronautical maps, confusion generated by different names and numbers was likely deliberate--at least in the early years--to obfuscate its location and purpose. Although it began on a small scale, as the war escalated to greater proportions, activity in the valley and personnel increased commensurately. Eventually containing Meo troops and their families, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Thai PARU advisors, U.S. Air Force (USAF) and U.S. Army (USA) personnel, all requiring housing and sustenance, the site burgeoned into the second largest city in Laos. <sup>5</sup> Before USAID built roads, the site was supplied entirely by air, with a portion of munitions being distributed by small fixed wing and helicopter pilots to outlying sites. <sup>6</sup>

On the morning of the second, after an Air America Transportation Department Volkswagen bus ride from the Apollo Hotel to the airport restaurant for breakfast, Jarina and the crew of 35F launched on a forty-five-minute flight to The Alternate. In between supply missions to local defensive positions on Skyline Ridge and surrounding areas, they drove twenty miles west-northwest to Pong Hai (LS-361) to conduct refugee work and perhaps recruiting to increase Vang Pao's depleted forces. Toward the end of the day, to conserve ferry

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<sup>5</sup> PARU: Thai Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit. A special warfare unit originally tasked to stay behind in case Thailand was invaded and taken over by the Chinese. With the advent of the Meo participation in the Lao war, teams of PARU were sent to Laos to actively train Meo guerrillas and actually fight the communists. Many died in the effort.

<sup>6</sup> For years, Long Tieng was the primary locus of supply activity, and later vicious fighting in Military Region Two. Operations relating to the site have been well described in previous works. Over the years the Author spent many days and nights at the base we generally called The Alternate.



A helicopter pilot being directed onto a better-than-average landing zone. The large pad on Skyline Ridge is accessible from any direction.

time and be available for early morning work, they were instructed to RON at 20A. (Eight plus forty-five.)

Fog and low clouds in mountain valleys, ravines, and river valleys often delayed early morning launches during the cold season. This was the case on the third. When weather conditions permitted, Jarina and crew returned to Pong Hai to continue refugee work. During the day, Mike encountered problems with 35F's VHF radio, the primary source of transmitting the required hourly "operations normal" call to radio operators in Vientiane or Udorn. Recovery was made to Wattay Airport. (Six plus forty-five.)

The next day, Terry Dunn (DOH 10/11/67) replaced Israel. Supply operations continued at Long Tieng until Jarina was relieved at Wattay Airport and deadheaded to Udorn on 617. (Six plus forty-five.) <sup>7</sup>

## **FEPA NEGOTIATIONS**

Discontent over the years regarding many facets of Company management policy, and perceived unfair treatment of system wide pilots compared to other commercial aviation operations had led to establishment of the Far East Pilots Association (FEPA) in 1969.

Formation and recognition of the association immediately improved the lot of line pilots with increased pay, improved work conditions, and other items deemed standard and essential to the profession. However, by late 1972 there was considerable conflict with the Company because of FEPA's increasingly dictatorial attitude. Also, because all pilots were not

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<sup>7</sup> Deadhead: A process for crews to journey into the field or relocate to their home bases on Company or non-Company (CASI) assets. There was a small amount of pay allocated to deadhead flight. Mike Jarina Interviews.

considered equal to the task, there was pressure from the Customer regarding seniority requirements when selecting pilots for the ultra-sensitive Special Project program.

*"The Company and Customer position was that they wanted the most qualified pilots for the very demanding [Special Project] work. If this could be accomplished within contractual seniority agreements, well and good. If not, they bypassed the system and selected personnel out of seniority. Pay never entered into this so far as Air America was concerned."* <sup>8</sup>

In addition to ongoing ceasefire talks in Paris between the United States and North Vietnamese representatives and in Vientiane between the communist Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS) and the Royal Lao Government, contract negotiations between Air America Company representatives and the Far East Pilot's Association (FEPA) representatives that had commenced on 1 November 1972, and were suspended during the Christmas holidays, reconvened in Bangkok on 4 January. <sup>9</sup>

The pilot committee noted that there was no significant change in the Company's position, and the general attitude seemed to have hardened. Related to pilot pay, the Company suggested acceptance of its latest offer or the present contract agreement. The Company did propose to make funds available for fringe benefits for accidental death and dismemberment. Bypassing seniority, Special Project issues were to be conducted outside the contract agreement. Now instead of the two-and-a-half-year contract agreement proposed in December, the Company wanted a contract for only a year.

After due deliberation, the pilot committee pointed out that the Company had failed to submit a formal pay offer since its submission of its opening position. In the absence of any

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<sup>8</sup> EW Knight Email, 12/21/00.

<sup>9</sup> Refer to Book 13 for information relating to both negotiations.

movement by the Company, the committee was unable to move from its current positions on the open issues. Emphasis on the qualification, assignment, and releasing of pilots on Special Projects needed to be discussed across the table. The Company representatives then asked for a recess to prepare a proposal on compensation. <sup>10</sup>

On the 6<sup>th</sup>, the Company submitted a specific proposal on pilot pay that increased hourly pay by two percent, added three years of longevity pay, and re-arranged area pay and hostility pay (presumably because it was subject to elimination by the Company on a unilateral basis). Captain's night pay was increased twenty-five cents. No change was proposed in trip hour pay and per diem expenses were to remain the same. Included was a thirty-five-dollar increase in station allowance. <sup>11</sup>

Two days later the FEPA pilot committee submitted a detailed proposal on pilot pay that downgraded the original December offer. The entire compensation section was restructured and language simplified. The proposed two-and-a-half-year contract continued to be an issue.

On the ninth, the Company modified the pay proposal. They proposed increasing hourly pay from two to five percent, but

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<sup>10</sup> James E. Meals, Vice President of Corporate Affairs 1970-1976, was stationed in Washington. As the chief negotiator for the Company, he worked directly with CEO Paul Velte. Meals had originally negotiated on behalf of FEPA during the first contract bargaining period. He performed such an excellent job for the union that the Company hired him as their chief negotiator.

<sup>11</sup> In retrospect, because of the political atmosphere and impending ceasefire, FEPA should have accepted the Company offer. But pilots are not known to be the sharpest implements in the tool box when it comes to business matters, so this was not deemed acceptable. Although the FEPA union was unique for a paramilitary organization, it is the Author's observation and opinion that unions initially provide excellent benefits, but in the quest to perpetuate an organization they eventually become a liability. In an effort to display progress to members and justify their positions, union leaders counterintuitively demand too much from companies, and the result is often not beneficial to either party.

decreased hostility pay by the same dollar amount. Then Company representatives requested that FEPA make an offer based on a short-term agreement. The committee complied, but added that this would greatly increase negotiating expenses (the FEPA-hired professional negotiator was charging 1,000 dollars per day). The submitted proposal provided a one-and-a-half-year agreement on pay and two and a half years on all provisions of the agreement.

A chronological review of early January negotiations was distributed to FEPA members throughout all the Far East). It was emphasized that all agreements were merely tentative, and relied on a final bilateral agreement. Already agreed-upon provisions were low cost or no cost items. The pilot committee's main problem was to "*persuade the Company to discontinue efforts to undermine, erode, and confuse provisions of the present agreement.*" <sup>12</sup>

Negotiations, more like wrangling with a bear at this stage, continued without much progress. After a final bilateral meeting, Association representatives requested a recess to brief union leaders at each station, who in turn would disseminate the information to the members.

The morning session opened with the association committee re-submitting its position on Special Projects, displacement and furlough and another downward revision of compensation. The Company representatives called a recess to consider proposals.

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<sup>12</sup> Jesse B. Walton, Chairman, FEPA Negotiating Committee to The FEPA Board of Directors, Status of Negotiations, 01/10/73. With negotiations proceeding unsuccessfully, believing their position was reasonable, the frustrated FEPA pilot committee reached out to the members for advice. However, because of geopolitical considerations and previous decisions in Washington, D.C., the die was already cast: the FEPA organization was doomed.

During the afternoon session, the Company rejected the proposal regarding Special Projects and displacement/furlough. Company negotiators stated that they doubted the committee was being serious in their proposals, and if they were serious, then they were unrealistic. FEPA's proposal on compensation was rejected as being exorbitant. There was no counter proposal from the Company.

The Company stated that its position on Special Projects and displacement was firm, and not subject to negotiation. The Company requested that the Association cede these sections in the contract and continue negotiations of all other sections on a package basis.

FEPA representatives requested a recess to consider this statement. It looked like the Company was being obdurate on critical contract items that would completely destroy the long-standing pilot seniority system. Therefore, the committee requested an emergency meeting of the FEPA board of directors to present the committee's recommendation for action to the board.

The impasse marked the end of formal negotiations and the only option and leverage the union possessed at this point was industrial action: a system wide strike. <sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> FEPA flyer from Schneider, 01/18/73, Status of Negotiations, sent to union presidents Captain Stuart, Plank-Vientiane; Lopes-Udorn; Winston, Stallman-Saigon; Okinawa. This was also distributed to union members.

Author Note: In retrospect we should have attempted to maintain what was contained in the last contract. Everyone knew that the war was nearly over and it was only a matter of time before participants would be out of a job. However, other stubborn union members were adamant about seniority issues and increases in pay. Also, the Special Project provision bothered them. I was in good stead because of a low seniority number and Special Project position, but I attempted to view the situation through the eyes of others, who were less fortunate. I really wanted the process to be over and be able to work with a clear mind. It was a terrible period during the Air America era, and became worse as we moved toward the 11th hour.



## **BILATERAL PEACE TALKS IN PARIS**

Rumors and speculation abounded in Vientiane's administrative capital regarding ceasefire negotiations between the U.S. and North Vietnam. On the sixth, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma consulted with U.S. Ambassador Godley. Somewhat distressed, he had heard from Paris watchers that the U.S had modified its stance on the withdrawal of foreign forces from Laos and would now accept North Vietnamese Army in the Kingdom. He and his government considered this unacceptable. Godley did not believe this was USG's stance, and queried Henry Kissinger.

Kissinger replied, *"The thought that we would accept NVA forces remaining in Laos is utter nonsense and you should make this very clear [to the Prime Minister]...Whatever you may hear from other sources, you should ignore. There are no reliable sources of information except what you hear directly from us."*<sup>14</sup>

Henry Kissinger and Tho resumed peace negotiations in Paris on the eighth. An agreement was reached on the ninth.

While talks continued to amend certain items, satisfied with the progress and approving the agreement, President Nixon halted the severe bombing, offshore shelling, and mining of harbors in North Vietnam. The same did not apply to South Vietnam.

Concurrent with the agreement, Alexander Haig journeyed to Saigon to inform Primer Thieu that if he chose to ignore the agreement, the U.S. unilaterally intended to sign a peace

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<sup>14</sup> Office of the Historian, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume 9, Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973. Item 251, Backchannel Message from the Ambassador to Laos (Godley) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 01/06/73.

Backchannel messaging: A secondary or covert route for the passage of information.

agreement with the North on the 23rd. Thieu waffled and deferred his decision until the 21st.

Haig then flew to Vientiane to keep Souvanna Phouma in the loop. He reviewed the status of the agreement.

*"Souvanna was pleased that ceasefire timing for Laos had been moved up to 15 days from [the] date of [the] Vietnam agreement and also grateful that maximum U.S. air would be available for use in Laos during the interval. I also urged Souvanna to maximize FAR efforts during this period to achieve best possible friendly position on the ground.*

*Souvanna said his principal concern was timing of NVA withdrawal from Laos under terms of [the] agreement asking why we had not fixed a specific deadline directly in our bilateral talks with Hanoi."* Haig replied, *"...Hanoi's obligation was specific and despite [the] absence of a fixed date for completion of withdrawal, Hanoi would have no grounds for protracting withdrawals..."*<sup>15</sup>

On the 23rd, President Nixon announced to the press that a peace agreement had been signed in Paris by representatives of the United States, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DVR), the Republic of South Vietnam, and the Provisional Government of the Republic of South Vietnam (PRG), or the Viet Cong (VC) National Liberation Front. Known as the Paris Agreement, or *"The Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam"* the ceasefire was slated to be implemented on the 28th. The day after this announcement Kissinger announced that a truce was also expected in Laos and Cambodia.

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<sup>15</sup> FRUS, #293, 01/18/73, Backchannel Message from the Vice Chief of Staff of the Army (Haig) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger). In the Author's estimation, Haig's conversation with Souvanna Phouma smacked of convoluted Washington speak. Even from the days of the 1962 Geneva Accords, North Vietnamese leaders never publicly admitted they had troops in "neutral" Laos.

The agreement was signed, ending the war and restoring peace in Vietnam. Because of South Vietnam's reluctance to recognize the Viet Cong Provisional Revolutionary Government, references to it were contained in a two-party version later signed by USG and North Vietnamese representatives.

The bilateral settlement included: A ceasefire in Vietnam, dismantling of all U.S. bases within sixty days, withdrawing all United States troops from the country in sixty days, the estimated 600 American prisoners of war incarcerated in North Vietnamese jails were to be released in sixty days (however, no provisions regarding those POWs suspected to be held in Laos was mentioned), withdrawal of all foreign troops from Laos and Cambodia, and prohibition of bases and troop movements through these countries. The North Vietnamese divisions already established in South Vietnam were allowed to remain. (Although it diminished the fighting, it failed to end and it was debatable who controlled what territory.) The 17th parallel--a geographic latitude--remained the demarcation line between the two countries that had been established in 1954. Reunification of the country was envisioned through a peaceful process. The International Control Commission (ICC), consisting of Canadians, Hungarians Poles, and Indonesians) was selected to supervise the agreement. South Vietnamese leader President Thieu would continue in office, there was to be no military movement across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), and no use of force applied to reunify the country.

The Paris ceasefire agreement was considered the final test of the U.S. and the Vietnam War after four years of hard work and uncertainty between the negotiators. Over that time, special envoy Henry Kissinger conducted twenty-four trips to Paris to discuss significant points with the North Vietnamese First Secretary. Following the signing, President Nixon officially

called the final agreement "peace with honor," but the President's numerous critics claimed the truce actually provided neither peace nor honor for the U.S. and the agreement could have been implemented much earlier in 1970. <sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> John Bowman, *The World Almanac of the Vietnam War* (New York, Bison Books, 1985), 337-339.

Release and return of the first 142 (out of a reported total of 587) U.S. prisoners began on the 12th and continued through 27 February. The first twenty POWs soon reached Travis Air Force Base in California, the base from which I departed in 1961 for Okinawa, to fulfill my overseas tour with USMC Helicopter Squadron-HMM-262.

Author Note: In Hanoi, the Pathet Lao released eleven prisoners in March. These included a Canadian, two missionaries captured at Keng Kok, and six crewmembers shot down over the Trails. CASI Porter pilot Ernie Brace (Beng Valley 1965) and USAF A-7 pilot, Charles Riess (PDJ Christmas Eve 1972) were among POWs released. Ironically, I had participated in failed SARs for both men.

By 29 March the last sixty-seven acknowledged POWs were released.

Thomas L Ahern Jr., *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos, 1961-1973* (Washington: CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2006), 486.

Philip Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History 1946-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 731, 735. Davidson concluded that the Paris agreement was badly flawed from USG standpoint. Moreover, there were no illusions either in Saigon or Washington that North Vietnam would forego its long effort to subjugate South Vietnam. Except for ICCS control commissions, deemed largely ineffective in previous years, the agreement provided no effective machinery (the ICC never had worked) for supervising the ceasefire and the future combat activities of either side. The sole threat to North Vietnam was the U.S. retaliating, and because of proposed Congressional intentions, this was not going to happen.

Directly after the ceasefire in Vietnam, the South Vietnamese were stronger than the in-country North Vietnamese Army. Heavy enemy casualties had incurred during the Easter Offensive, and the northern bombing campaign had severely depleted NVA assets. However, this would not last.

Warren, William/Moungkariby, Wilat, *A Century and a Half of Thai American Relations*. (Thammasat University, Bangkok, 1982)

Mister Warren asserted that President Nixon's goal was to detach from the Vietnam War without humiliation. The 1973 truce provided an interval between the withdrawal, and the communist takeover of South Vietnam.

### **MR-3 AND ADR WORK**

On the eighth I conducted FCFs and training with Link Luckett (DOH 09/01/66) in Papa Hotel Delta. The session was shortened by auto-stabilization (ASE) problems. (One plus five, thirty minutes instructor.) I was released from duty in the early afternoon.

Earlier, I had met with other Special Project crewmembers in Buddy Rogers' Agency AB-1 office day to discuss a Vinh-similar mission. Because of increasingly degraded information emanating from the Vinh telephone tap and that relayed through the two antenna systems to Nakhon Phanom's (NKP) state-of-the-art banks of computers, plans were formed to check and reposition the number two antenna in the Nhommarath Route-8 area of Laos to hopefully enhance the signal. Captain Scratch Kanach (DOH 05/10/62), who had placed the second ADR antenna, would perform the work. Having been part of the operation during this original insertion, I would back him up again. <sup>17</sup>

This mission had a potential for problems, for since late October 1972, Vietnamese troops had been on the move around the Thakhet region. Intent on capturing as much territory as possible in this area before a ceasefire was announced and came to fruition, fighting had continued through the end of the year and into early 1973. <sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> For background and events of the protracted Vinh, North Vietnam, tap mission, refer to Book 13.

<sup>18</sup> Kenneth Conboy with James Morrison, *Shadow War: CIA's Secret War in Laos* (Boulder: Paladin Press, 1995), 395. Conboy's comprehensive and excellent book (although not overly free with footnotes and credits) provided the Author a basic primer for information pertaining to historic events and often to confirm or introduce the Author into timeframes in which he participated. During the course of his voluminous research and writing, after becoming aware that Jim Glerum had divulged much about the Special Project operations, the Author also provided Ken Conboy with substantial information, particularly that regarding the 1972-1973 Special Project operations in Cambodia, Vinh, North Vietnam, and Sam Neua, Laos.



Used extensively for Special Projects, the versatile Twin Otter about to depart Long Tieng, Laos.

Unknown

Hotel Delta's automatic stabilization equipment (ASE) was repaired, so after ascertaining all mechanical and electronic systems onboard our S-58Ts were working properly--we required gold plated aircraft--Al Cates (DOH 12/27/66), Deak Kennedy, and I along with Scratch and his crew, launched for the Nakhon Phanom base. While our ships were being refueled, Captain Jim Pearson (DOH 05/03/62) and Paul Broussard (DOH 11/11/65) reconed the ADR <sup>19</sup> area in Twin Otter 868. <sup>20</sup> After lunching at the Air Force dining facility, we crossed the Mekong River to initiate the mission. I stood off a distance from the actual site so as not to direct too much attention to the activity, but close enough to provide assistance if needed. Scratch identified the ADR and hovered over the forested hill, while Chuck Low (DOH 10/21/70) hooked the hoist cable to an eye ring on the device's center of gravity. Then, as Scratch slowly lifted and rotated the device, a technician in the rear of Jim Pearson's aircraft reported signal strength in one to five increments based on observations from the green screen of an onboard oscilloscope receiver. (Four plus thirty-eight, five landings.) At the maximum, or best, signal strength recorded, Kanach reinserted the ADR in the top of a tree and we departed for Udorn. (Four plus forty, four landings.) Only time would tell if our efforts

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<sup>19</sup> ADR: Acronym for Air Deployable Relay. The term Spider Relay was also used by some individuals

<sup>20</sup> Jim Pearson's FEPA Flight Crew Log for 01/09/73: Locating to Nakhon Phanom and employing onboard electronic devices, Captain Jim Pearson and crew had been busy on the 3rd assessing the Vinh tap's signal strength with an onboard oscilloscope.





Overflying Sam Tong to Ban Na displayed numerous water-filled "buffalo wallows," courtesy of constant Allied area bombing in 1971-1972.

Author Collection.



proved fruitful. <sup>21</sup>

On the ninth, Mike Jarina, Ray Purvis and Flight Mechanic Bob Nobel (nickname Nobs DOH 07/17/68) crewed Bell 205 Papa Foxtrot Hotel to The Alternate. During the six-hour day, they covered considerable territory, making stops at Ban Na (LS-15) north of Sam Tong, Padong (LS-05), and Tha Vieng (LS-13) east of Long Tieng. The crew remained overnight (RON) at the limited Site 20-Alternate accommodations.

### **SALA PHOU KHOUN**

North of Long Tieng substantial Pathet Lao forces maintained an uncontested presence at Moung Soui (L-108). Toward the end of 1972, in a land grab attempt, several Pathet Lao battalions moved west along Route-7 toward the government-controlled strategic Route 7/13 road junction located at Sala Phou Khoun (LS-260). <sup>22</sup> This forced shaky government troops to withdraw south along Route-13. By 12 December the road between Vientiane and Luang Prabang was closed to friendly traffic.

Since the Phou Khoun intersection controlled ground traffic to the northern reaches of Route-13 from the administrative capital at Vientiane to the royal capital at Luang Prabang, the Royal Lao Government (RLG) was anxious to reacquire the site, particularly at a time when a ceasefire agreement would likely

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<sup>21</sup> At this time, it is doubtful that the true cause for distorted transmissions was fully understood. While installing tap insulators by feel in the dark the two-man indigenous team erred, placing both insulator taps on the same wire. For this reason, the signals were never entirely intelligible, although sophisticated electronic enhancement provided critical and sufficient intelligence to Doctor Henry Kissinger in order to determine enemy intentions and influence the Paris negotiations.

<sup>22</sup> Sala Phou Khoun: Common to transliteration to Lao names, there are various spellings-Koun is one. The Author will use Khoun. A Sala was considered a rest stop for weary travelers in both Thai and Lao languages. Phou refers to a mountain. Hence, Sala Phou Khoun translated as a rest stop in the mountains.



The fortified Sala Phou Khoun Route 7/13 junction (LS-260) during a period of Lao government control following the ceasefire. The shell-shot stone building was originally a French-operated hostel to accommodate travelers between Vientiane and Luang Prabang. Two entrenched artillery pieces are located to the upper right.

Author Collection.

institute a *lasses-faire* policy to those who controlled territory. Located in relatively harsh terrain, the only road to Luang Prabang had often been contested since the early sixties, with varying degrees of success. Instructed by U.S. Special Forces and military advisors embedded in the USOM Requirements Office of the U.S. Embassy, the Royal Lao Army was partial to large-scale pincer tactics that required considerable coordination, aggressiveness, and was rarely successfully accomplished by the often-touted world's worst army.<sup>23</sup> Overall leadership ability was always a problem for the FAR, and this operation was no exception.

By early January, marching orders were issued for the recapture of Sala Phou Khoun and adjoining areas. A unit would be heli-lifted north of the junction and several battalions, supported by tanks, artillery guns, and other rolling stock would move north from the former Neutralist headquarters at Vang Vieng (L-16) along Route-13 toward the objective.<sup>24</sup> While this southern element advanced generally unopposed, and arrived seven miles from the target, the northern column failed to move forward from their insertion point. At that juncture, enemy artillery and troops exerted considerable pressure, and friendly losses triggered southern units to "attack in a different direction."<sup>25</sup> Within two days they had retraced their movement, arriving near Mounq Kassy (LS-153).

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<sup>23</sup> Route-13 road operations in this area are described in previous books. Except for Operation Triangle in 1964, no measure of lasting success was ever generally attained by government troops.

<sup>24</sup> Jim Pearson FEPA Flight Crew Log: Except for participating in the ADR mission on the 9th, from the 4th through the 12th, Twin Otter pilot Jim Pearson supported the FAR movement.

<sup>25</sup> U.S. Marine Corps dictum at the forced retreat from the Chosin Reservoir in South Korea. In the FAR's case, retreating was considered normal procedure.

Although entirely predictable, FAR performance was deemed unacceptable to the General Staff and American advisors in Vientiane. Therefore, in order to stiffen the line and prevent total disaster at Moung Kassy, three volunteer Thai battalions were drawn from General Vang Pao's assets and inserted along the road northeast of Kassy. From their defensive positions the Thais managed to stop Pathet Lao-driven PT-76 tanks with LAWS rockets and to neutralize the situation, but the FAR southern column refused to resume a second sortie up Route-13. <sup>26</sup>

In order to reinitiate and reinvigorate the operation to reopen the road, a tough GM-31 SGU Regiment from Savannakhet, advised by Agency Case Officer Jim Barber, was introduced into the equation. First, a landing zone large enough to accommodate large troop-carrying helicopters had to be selected, and pathfinders jumped in to secure the territory. After examining an aerial photograph and identifying a suitable landing area, on 19 January, Nong Saphong's (LS-235) Case Officer Don Courtney and Twin Otter pilot Jim Rhyne flew over the projected landing zone. After recording a LORAN present position of a dual rice paddy area three miles southeast of Sala Phou Khoun, they returned to Moung Kassy to plan the night's work. <sup>27</sup> Courtney's Kha Commando Raider team consisted of twelve elite young men, called Team Pathfinder.

Given properly functioning electronic equipment, LORAN navigation was normally accurate, but as our experience in upper Military Region Two during our Special Project log mission attested, extraneous and often unknown features could render the

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<sup>26</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 389-390.

<sup>27</sup> Don Courtney and I both attended Training and Test (T&T) Regiment officer training at the USMC facility at Mainside Quantico, Virginia in 1957. After commissioning that same year, we were roommates while attending Officer's Basic School at Camp Barrett, a new facility in Quantico's western boonies.



equipment inaccurate. <sup>28</sup> That was likely the case this night. Courtney was onboard monitoring his men when the jump bell rang. Nothing looked right to him, so he restrained the first jumper in the door. After a second pass, he looked down at the ground, and in the illumination of partial moonlight he could see that they had passed over the rice fields and were almost at the road junction and trees when the jump signal rang.

After circling twice more with the same results, Don realized that the LORAN equipment might be sending erroneous signals. Therefore, he radioed Rhyne in the ICS that he would jump the team by using his eyes and judgement. By that time the young man standing in the door was thoroughly chilled and severely cramped from his half crouch. When Don alerted him to jump, in the process of restoring circulation and warmth, he jumped up and down, snagging the top of the doorjamb with his parachute. Seeing a potential for disaster, Courtney grabbed his shoulders and forced him down six inches, enough to clear the door. The rest of the team followed the leader.

Intending to deliver the regiment to the "secured" landing zone in three shuttles, the next morning 300 troops from GM-31 boarded seven USAF H-53s and two Air America Chinook helicopters at Vang Vieng. Don Courtney went on the first ship to retrieve his pathfinders. Remnants of Pathet Lao were lurking in the area, and one USAF helicopter was hit while descending for landing. The lift continued, as did enemy groundfire. Three more helicopters were hit, but the entire regiment was in place by

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<sup>28</sup> During that particular operation, an active enemy radar van conducting sweeps on Route-6 was later determined to be the culprit contributing to our aborted missions. The interference caused digital LORAN readouts to emit a track ten miles to the east. It caused us to abort at least two missions, and eventually botched the entire mission.

mid-day. Courtney mustered his team and accompanied them back to the launch site on one of the returning helicopters. <sup>29</sup>

One of the Air America Chinooks incurring battle damage was flown by Captain Bob Hitchman. It was hit in the upper aft portion of the cargo bay, where many parallel hydraulic lines were exposed. In addition to these, a drive shaft was perforated. The aircraft was left in place, later to be repaired and recovered. <sup>30</sup>

After assembling, GM-31 pushed forward toward the junction with little opposition, and by the 24th the objective was in hand. With the spearhead successful, the north and south task forces finally moved out at "high port," and the road was declared cleared of enemy by 31 January.

Within a relatively short time, several Thai battalions replaced GM-31 and established a two-gun fire support base (FSB) at Sala Phou Khoun. This was still the case when the ceasefire was declared in Laos. <sup>31</sup>

## **UPCOUNTRY**

At dark-thirty on the tenth, the Volkswagen B-bus driver tooted his horn at my Nong Khai Highway house. <sup>32</sup> At the Air

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<sup>29</sup> According to Don Courtney, that was the first and last time Team Pathfinder was utilized. Other more mundane jobs were assigned to them.

<sup>30</sup> Wayne Knight, Email. Primary damage was to overhead drive shafting; Bob Davis flew the aircraft to Udorn after repairs. He indicated that it was an exciting rotor engagement, as the rotors began turning as soon as the first engine was started.

<sup>31</sup> Ken Conboy, 390.  
Don Courtney Emails, 09/14/16, 09/15/16, 09/16/16.

<sup>32</sup> B-bus: For years the Air America Transportation Department exclusively used these leased vehicles to deliver aircraft crewmembers and their gear to and from the airfield for assignments. They were also employed to transfer flight equipment to aircraft on the ramp and Q warehouse. Ground personnel generally used large leased busses for transportation to and from town.



Road's end thirty miles north of Udorn. The dirt Nong Khai highway (part of the Friendship Highway) from Bangkok that was normally passed en route to Wattay Airport. The road went through the local airfield and terminated at the Mekong River.

Author Collection.

America facility, I was programmed to join Link Lockett at the Q warehouse for a thirty-minute ride over Nong Khai to Wattay Airport on C-123 4545. We disembarked at the airport and lugged our gear to Twinpac Papa Hotel Bravo, where Chuck Low was in the final stages of a detailed preflight inspection. Then we walked to Papa Chu's Air America-sponsored restaurant to purchase a hasty breakfast and a standard sack of ham and cheese sandwiches to tide us over until supper. A superior pilot, Lockett had successfully transitioned and upgraded to PIC in the Twinpac. My job that day was to act as an instructor pilot and satisfy the Company-mandated route check.

Flying from the right seat, Link conducted most of the flying in The Alternate area, and after securing Bravo on the Long Tieng parking ramp just after sunset, I logged seven plus fifty hours. (Four plus twenty-five IP, four landings.)

After deadheading to Wattay Airport on Papa Foxtrot Juliet, we caught a ride to Udorn on Bell 204B 1196 Whiskey (96W). It had been a long duty day with substantial repositioning, but that often was the case, and would remain the nature of the beast throughout the remainder of the war.

That same day Mike Jarina and his crew of Ray Purvis and Bob Nobel, who had RON at Long Tieng, began the day early. After flying nine plus thirty hours, they RON there again. The enemy was still actively moving their artillery pieces along the road, and during the day and night the Long Tieng area received seventy-nine rounds of 130mm fire. Defensive positions had been hardened, so except for morale purposes and sleep deprivation, the artillery fire had little effect on area fortifications.

Thursday afternoon, prior to releasing Lockett for unsupervised Twinpac work, I conducted a local proficiency check with him in XW-PHA. Tom Neis (DOH 04/23/71) was our Flight Mechanic. (Two plus fifteen IP.) Jarina and crew worked the day



at The Alternate and at Ban Na. They later recovered at Wattay Airport. Relieved, they deadheaded to Udorn on C-123, 4576. (Eight plus fifty-five.)

On the 12<sup>th</sup>, I deadheaded to Wattay Airport with First Officer RE Eaton (DOH 05/09/71) and Flight Mechanic Deak Kennedy to fly XW-PHE. There were problems with the number one power section achieving full power, so it was early afternoon before this was corrected and we arrived at Long Tieng. Assigned to work in the valley, I conducted thirty landings, supplying local troop positions and fire bases (FSB). We recovered at Wattay Airport and RON in town. (Six plus twenty-five.)

Since mid-December, Bouam Long (LS-32) had been strongly pressured by elements of two enemy regiments. This was not a precedent, for ever since the entire upper Military Region Two region had been lost or abandoned in 1969, Site-32, the only government garrison north of the Plain of Jars (PDJ) remaining in hostile territory, and close to enemy LOCs, presented a prime target for the Vietnamese. Aerial resupply problems caused by surrounding enemy AAA guns became so acute at one time that Air America Chinooks replaced fixed wing as the prime supply lifeline for the Meo. Chinook cargo holds were fitted with rollers like on the fixed wing cargo planes to discharge loads in the bowl at low altitudes. The procedure worked and loads were delivered to surrounding outposts either by helicopter crews or hardy mountain ponies. Moreover, allied air strikes, particularly those from F-111 pilots, made positive



Behind the fire truck, a Air America Porter, a C-123, and a C-130 on the Long Tieng parking ramp. Displaying the red Erawan, a Lao three-headed insignia. The C-123 was transferred to the Royal Lao Air Force, but continued to be flown by Air America pilots until Lao pilots could be trained.

Unknown

contributions toward maintaining the site in government hands. <sup>33</sup>

We departed Vientiane early on Saturday, and were directed to Bouam Long where there was an abundance of logistical work backed up. Alternating with Eaton, I conducted forty landings within the site's perimeter. Most of the support that was in the form of sling loads required hooking the load, flying to the assigned outpost, and pickling the net on the landing zone. It was tedious, but satisfying work that did not require much technique. We terminated at Udorn at 1830 with ten plus twenty hours, which included a ferry flight.

Chief Pilot Wayne Knight (DOH 11/21/61) had been on vacation after Christmas until the 12th. On the thirteenth, he conducted a Chinook functional check flight (FCF) with Wayne Webb (DOH 04/13/65) onboard. Webb was still the Company check and training instructor pilot for rotary wing in the Bangkok-based training department overseen by DL Kosteff (DOH 08/24/65). By participating in this activity, Webb obtained exposure to the Chinook. (They also FCF 815857 on the 17th.) The next day, Knight and Captain Bill Hutchison (DOH 02/27/66) FCF another Chinook.

The original purpose of obtaining the Air America Chinooks was to replace the no-longer-authorized U.S. military crews in conducting heavy lift movement of howitzers, ammunition, and troops. Of course, Customer-conceived Special Project missions were preordained. The machines were too great an asset not to

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<sup>33</sup> The Bouam Long warriors were well seasoned and accomplished fighters. Under Cher Pao Moua's leadership, the site was never captured by the enemy during the twelve years I worked in the Lao Theater. Even though Laos became a communist haven in 1975, Bouam Long remained independent for years afterward. According to Author Jim Parker (former Case Officer Mule), in 1997 Cher Pao Moua was leading a "small Hmong resistance group around LS-32...the only group in Indochina never beaten by the communists." Jim Parker *Timeline* (Author's draft copy #9): *Battle for Skyline Ridge 18 December 1971 to 4 April 1972*, 34.



CH-47 Chinook 019 parked in front of the Air America Terminal for a publicity photograph.

Judy Porter Collection.

employ where suitable and deemed useful. The large noisy target was generally not a problem, for all future night missions were conducted in remote areas where noise was not considered so important.

On the 19<sup>th</sup>, Knight and Herman Gehring flew 815857 to Wattay Airport to retrieve personnel. From there they continued south to Savannakhet to conduct a troop movement to the Moung Phalane area. Covering abundant territory in a day, they continued south to Pakse to help move Thai battalions to positions around Paksong on the Bolovens Plateau. (Ten plus fifty-three.) They RTB Udorn the following morning.

Two days later, Wayne and Scratch Kanach ferried the same aircraft south to participate in a special night mission at Paksong on the Bolovens, scheduled for the following evening.

Working and RON at the PS-44 base, with Customer Shep Johnson and others' assistance, they practiced cargo rigging and night air drops. (Five plus ten, one fifty night.) They used night vision goggles (NVG) and LORAN equipment, but electronics were employed strictly as a navigation tool, not a cargo drop aid. Alternating positions to acquaint each other with the equipment, LORAN was operated by the left seat pilot.

No hostile action was encountered during the cargo drops at Paksong and positions along Route-23, but the area was not considered secure, and there was always a potential for trouble. They employed the same rollers to move polarized loads in the cargo compartment as were used during Bouam Long drops. Flying tight patterns to remain within a friendly perimeter, the loads were jettisoned from the rear ramp at a low altitude, but high enough that would still allow proper parachute deployment.

They nearly lost Shep Johnson that night. As per Kicker standard operating procedure (SOP), he was wearing a parachute, but because the cabin load was substantial and he needed to

maneuver around the cargo section, he disconnected from his gunner's belt. In the process, Shep almost went airborne accompanying a load.

Since Wayne had to be in the office on the morning of the 24th to receive FEPA members returning to work, the crew RTB the same night. (Five plus five night.)<sup>34</sup>

Sunday Mike Jarina deadheaded to Lima-08 (Vientiane) on Hotel-59 to fly PFJ with Jon Stewart (DOH 03/07/67) and Tod Yourgliche.

With rumors rife circulating in our Theater of an imminent ceasefire, and with the enemy controlling the Plain of Jars, and figuratively looking down the throat of the Long Tieng complex from the Tha Tham Bleung (LS-72) area and heights of Phou Pha Sai, General Vang Pao had to act quickly. Hoping to remove some pressure from Bouam Long and regain some territory on the southern Plain, Vang Pao and his American advisors planned to dispatch three intact task forces to various areas. One would move east from the Ban Na (LS-15) area toward the Plain of Jars. Another unit would move northeast to Xieng Khouang Ville (Lima-03) in the Route-4 valley. The third task force, composed of four Thai irregular battalions, would recapture Moug Soui (L-108) with superior forces.<sup>35</sup>

In preparation for the operation, Jarina delivered Vang Pao's officers to the traditional jump-off site at Khang Kho (LS-204) to brief principals regarding the impending operation. Then he did the same at Bouam Long to brief and keep Cher Pao in the loop. While working there, a Chinook crew received some groundfire. The Papa Foxtrot Juliet Bell crew recovered at Wattay Airport just before dark with eight plus thirty hours.

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<sup>34</sup> EW Knight Emails, 12/22/00, 07/11/01.

<sup>35</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 390.

On the morning of the 15th, Jarina and crew launched north toward The Alternate. They spent the day moving personnel and supplies in preparation for the upcoming operation. Recovering at Wattay Airport with nine plus thirty hours, the pilots deadheaded to Udorn on Hotel-91. <sup>36</sup>

While the days counted down until a multi-country ceasefire became a reality, and the FEPA/Company contract negotiations were resolved, we continued to support upcountry operations.

Early Tuesday morning I deadheaded to Wattay Airport on C-123 671 to join Eaton and MA Leveriza (DOH 09/02/67) in XW-PHB. We returned to Bouam Long to continue moving bullets, beans, and bandages to defensive outposts. <sup>37</sup>

We recovered at Wattay Airport for a night in Vientiane. (Nine plus twenty-five, forty landings.) Eaton was relieved and went to Udorn and was replaced by MG "Buzz" Baiz (DOH 10/14/70).

Departing the airport early on the 17th, we flew north across the sunbaked flood plains, past Ban Keun, and over rivers and mountains to The Alternate, where we began moving troops and supplies into jump-off positions in support of the offensive slated to commence the following day. Still averaging forty landings, and terminating at Wattay Airport after dark, the long day netted us eleven plus forty hours.

Eaton replaced Baiz on Thursday and we returned to Bouam Long. As the defensive perimeter expanded, I worked a little further from the outposts surrounding the bowl. As a result, I only conducted thirty landings. We recovered again at Wattay Airport after dark. (Nine plus thirty, fifty minutes night.)

On the 19th we flew north to Long Tieng for the day. Both government task forces heading toward the Nipple and Xieng

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<sup>36</sup> Mike Jarina interviews.

<sup>37</sup> Bullets, beans, and bandages: A trite military term describing the general nature of supply missions.





North of Vientiane, adjacent to the Nam Ngum, the fairly large community of Ban Keun (LS-44), pointed toward Ritaville Ridge and the mountains beyond. The site marked a recognizable waypoint in fair, and often in foul weather.

Author Collection.



Khouang Ville appeared to be making progress. Shuttling supplies forward, we did our best to support them.

Toward the end of the day, with Bravo timed out for a hundred-hour inspection, we returned to home plate after dark. (Eight plus fifteen, one zero five minutes night).

***"There are other competitors in the helicopter business here now...One of them got shot in the belly the other day because he didn't know the area and is so green. The Arizona helicopter group bunch only work for USAID but are probably being groomed to take the place of us trouble-makers..."***

Letter Home, 01/25/73.

Based at Wattay Airport, Arizona Helicopters maintained two Bell 206s on contract with United States Aid for International Development (USAID). <sup>38</sup> The small, not particularly powerful Jet Rangers were not well suited for work in the mountains, and were flown by relatively inexperienced pilots. <sup>39</sup> The short history of the fledgling company in Laos was not good. One pilot managed to damage a tail pylon and crashed at a refugee site south of Long Tieng. Captain Green, another naïve pilot, flying low where he should not have been, had been working for USAID in Military Region Three on the 19th. Receiving groundfire, Green was wounded in the abdomen, but managed to fly west toward the Mekong before landing in scrub-type no-man's-land at UMT

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<sup>38</sup> With Continental Air Services and Air America already performing air supply work in Laos, the addition of Arizona Helicopters was consistent with State Department and Agency policy to create the illusion to outsiders of a competitive non-military civilian commercial operation.

<sup>39</sup> I later flew the Jet Ranger for a FAR 135 helicopter company operation in New Orleans, Louisiana, and found the aircraft well suited for commercial work.

coordinates VE4453. Green was evacuated to a hospital. <sup>40</sup>

At the request of Vientiane principals, aware of our capability to recover aircraft, Udorn operations scheduled me to ferry a maintenance team more than a hundred miles east to the Jet Ranger site. After the rotor blades were removed and sturdy nylon straps attached to an eyebolt installed on the rotorhead, I would be tasked to sling the relatively light helicopter a considerable distance north to Wattay Airport.

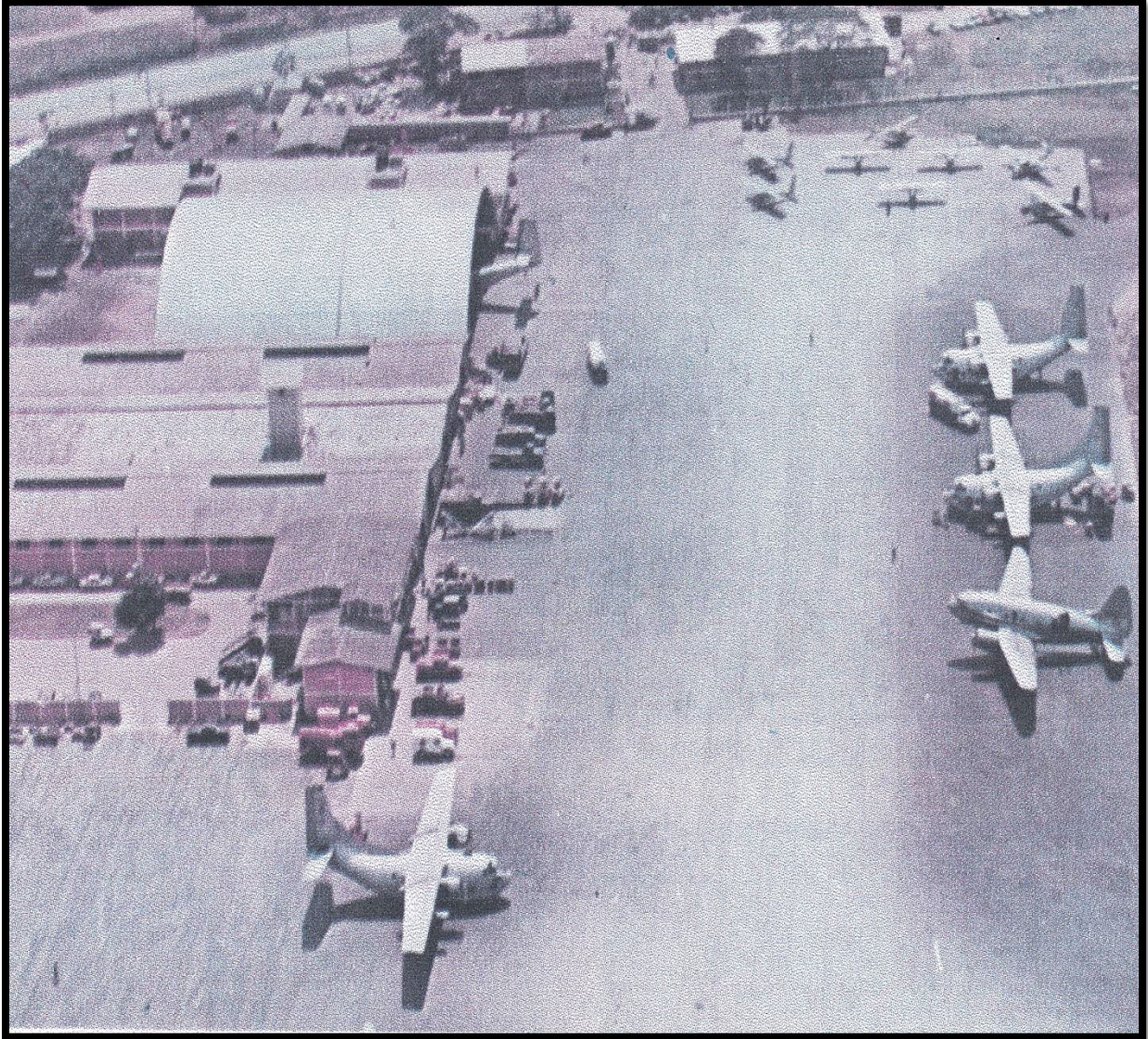
As there did not seem to be much hurry attached to the recovery operation, I checked into the Air America facility at 1045. Mike Lappiere, Leveriza, and I would be using Papa Hotel Bravo for the lift.

In a supposedly secure area, the battle-damaged Jet Ranger was located north of Thakhet at Ban Huai Dua, seven miles south-southwest of the Grove Jones site, on Route-13. Grove Jones boasted some historical significance as it was generally southwest of a tin mine formerly operated by the French (including many Dien Bien Phu survivors) for a high-ranking Lao official. The area was also controlled by government troops and advised by an American (White Star) Special Forces team in 1962.

It was late afternoon before lead man Gaza Eiler and his experienced crew completed their work and he was ready to hook the load to my cargo hook. There was plenty of power available. The ship easily came off the ground and was stable. The trip to Wattay Airport, necessarily slow and uneventful, was quite boring. Obtaining clearance into the airport, I deposited the load on the CASI ramp and recovered at the Air America area.

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<sup>40</sup> According to Jack Knotts who later worked for Arizona Helicopters, Green returned to Laos after a few months' rehabilitation. Green *"had an American wife who was a troublemaker. Arizona had to get rid of Green, as his wife had also turned him into a troublemaker."*



The Air America parking ramp, support buildings, and ground equipment at Wattay Airport Vientiane, Laos. Smaller STOL fixed wing are located at the upper right-hand corner. Other cargo aircraft, one in the process of loading are C-123s and a C-47.

We were told to leave Bravo in place and return to Udorn, but as no transportation was available, we were obliged to RON. Mike Jarina was also there, having deadheaded on 617.

The next morning, I managed to obtain a ride south on CASI aircraft XW-PDI. After arriving in the operations area corridor and preparing to stow my gear in my locker, one of the Thai clerks advised there was a phone call for me from AB-1. "Moon Man" Wally Smith was on the line. Anxious to restart operations, and fishing to determine my loyalty and position on union activities, he was interested to know if I would be available the following day for a trip and RON at PS-44 to conduct training for planned and imminent missions. Embarrassed, I reluctantly informed him that I supported the pilot association and would follow the policy and guidelines determined by our local FEPA leaders. <sup>41</sup>

Scratch Kanach was also in the hallway, so I cornered and quizzed him regarding the Special Project vs. FEPA issue. Always stubborn, and sometimes evasive person, Kanach assumed a different tact and opted for the Special Project in lieu of a union walkout. Although differing on this subject, we were not necessarily at odds as the situation raced toward a climax. However, I was disappointed over his decision to allow the Special Project cloud his judgement when it came to preserving FEPA's principles. I normally respected his wisdom, but not in this case.

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<sup>41</sup> The situation presented a conundrum. I had freely joined FEPA, and no matter how much I believed in the Special Project work, I was obligated to support union policy. Moreover, there was considerable peer pressure for adherence to this. Although it sometimes hurt me over the course of my overseas flying career, commitment was and still is important to me.



When FEPA was in its infancy Scratch was elected vice president of the Udorn branch. His selection was a total façade. Time soon revealed that he never really took the position seriously, nor had he actively participated in the fledgling union. I considered this non-action unworthy of the man. Not in keeping with his title, he should have resigned, but at the time I also recognized that his assumed participation and stellar reputation would go a long way toward influencing borderline pilots to join the association.

Like others, I was conflicted. Wanting only to perform the job I loved, I was never a strong union member. Feeling unsuited for the tasks, I turned down offers to run for office and help negotiate the contacts. My support would have to be enough. Now that a certain confrontation was approaching the eleventh hour, I harbored severe reservations regarding striking the "hand that fed me." Never liking altercations, my guts churned over the FEPA/company actions, and I lost a lot of sleep in the process.

## **THE ANATOMY OF A STRIKE**

*"We went right down to the wire with the Company and lost. Initially everyone supported a strike and at the last moment Vientiane and Saigon backed out. Udorn was almost 100 percent for a strike and was until the bitter end. We had some poor souls who thought we could pull it out ourselves, but the majority including myself did not. I believe that the enclosed letter the Company passed out scared many.*

*I believe that this is the end of the Far East Pilot's Association. What the Company will do now is up to them. I believe they will play it low key for a while and then cut people as they see fit. Some people are in a nasty mood but this will pass. Some will resign as a result of this action, in fact,*

*eight have already resigned in the past month, something that never happens this time of year. We were all prepared to give up our jobs to resolve the impasse with the Company. Without everyone's support we could not pull it off.*

*There has been a lot of tension and strain these last few days. I personally am glad it is over as I was losing sleep and my temper.*

*Please file these letters in a safe place as I may want to refer to them when I write my book, **Forty Years of Fun and Failure.**"*

Letter Home, 01/25/73.

On Monday afternoon, the 22<sup>nd</sup>, and the day before the strike deadline, I was scheduled to standby at the Air America facility with other pilots who were not away on leave, STO, or flying in the field. The object of the gathering became obvious when two letters were posted on the bulletin board or distributed by the Company management. One was directed to system wide management personnel to explain the situation to the media, the other was disseminated to the pilots.

*"The Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer of Air America announced that Air America, Inc. and the Far East Pilots' Association have been negotiating since November 20 [1972] a number of amendments to the present work agreement between the Company and its pilots. The principal issues being discussed and negotiated involve pay and certain work rules. The Company believes its proposals are fair and equitable and regret that the FEPA negotiating team has seen fit to call upon the pilot group to strike commencing 2400 hours local time on Tuesday, January 23, 1973 in order to force upon its irresponsible demands in complete disregard of the national interest of the United States and its allies with whom the*

*Company has contracts and contrary to the laws of the host governments of the areas in which the company operates. The Company further believed that the FEPA negotiating committee's actions do not represent the personal and professional interests of the majority of the pilots and therefore is making its proposals known to the individual pilots involved in hopes that a mutual understanding might be quickly resolved. During this period the Company is providing flight services utilizing management pilots and line pilots who wish to work to support critical refugee relief programs."* <sup>42</sup>

Then a second more explicit letter was distributed locally, with a tear slip to authenticate the individual's receipt. Calculated to influence weak sisters to non-compliance of union proclamation, it was both informative and highly intimidating:

*"The Far East Pilots' Association, this date, gave notice to Air America Inc. that effective the 23rd day of January at 2400 hours the Association is calling for a "stand down" of the pilots who perform flying services for Air America.*

*The Company regrets that the Association took the above action and desires to take this opportunity to inform you that should you desire to continue flying after the effective time of the "stand down" notice, we welcome you and will have employment for you, the general details of which are contained in the attached circular. (Circular outlining final Company offer will be prepared when this offer has been completely definitized).*

*In the event you will not report for duty by 0800 on the day a strike becomes effective and subsequent days, you are hereby given notice that you are terminated as an employee of*

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<sup>42</sup> The notice was posted on Company bulletin boards at various stations throughout the system for all to read, (01/22/73). Derogatory, skewed as to true facts, and citing the situation solely from the Company position, in the Author's estimation, the content unfairly tended to portray the pilot group as a collection of rogues.

*Air America, Inc. and can no longer be sponsored in your host country as such. All pay will cease as of the aforementioned time and your host governments will be notified, at that time of your lack of sponsorship.*

*Should you be unable to report for duty due to illness/physical disability, you must, in accordance with the Company Personnel Manual submit yourself, prior to the time stated above for reporting for flight duty, to the Air America, Inc. clinic for complete examination and Medical Department determination as to your fitness to perform flight duties. Failure to follow this procedure will be interpreted to be a support of industrial action.*

*We deeply regret that the Company has been placed in the position whereby it is necessary to exercise such strong measures by we have been left with no alternative.*

*We wish to emphasize that you consider your personal actions in this matter very seriously. Your job is still here if you want it.* <sup>43</sup>

Despite the negotiations in Paris, and a feeling that "peace" was at hand, the war in our Theater was still not over. Therefore, on Tuesday, the morning of the proposed pilot standdown, Captain Al Cates, Flight Mechanic Chuck Low, and I crewed XW-PHA upcountry. Since Al was a known fence-sitter,

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<sup>43</sup> Form letter #162 containing an Air America, Inc. Letterhead was addressed to the Author and signed by CJ Abadie, Vice President, Udorn.

EW Knight Email, 12/21/00. Captain Brown was the working name for the Abadie letter that was issued to all pilots just prior to the strike deadline. Wayne later heard some people say that he pulled a fast one by distributing several letters on a trip south in the Chinook on the 15th with Scratch Kanach. (Distribution had begun prior to this.) That he implicated Scratch in anti-union activities. Wayne denied this. He used the southern trip to distribute the letters as he was directed. Scratch and Wayne discussed these rumblings later and they both considered it inconsequential. I never heard the term, "Captain Brown letter" or reference to their distribution to pilots in the field.





Still manned after the 1971-1972 sieges, Long Tieng defensive positions were manned by both Thai and Meo troops, numerous elevated positions dotted the area. Displaying a white signal, the Hotel Hotel pad was located on the reverse slope of the southern ridge that overlooked The Alternate valley.





Looking northwest at the royal capital of Luang Prabang and air strip that lay adjacent to the Mekong River.

Author Collection.

unsure if he would support a walk-out, I was charged to bring him into the fold. While working numerous defensive positions on high ground in and around Long Tieng, we exchanged views, discussing pros and cons of the proposed strike. As the day wore on, we exhausted the subject, but in the end, I thought that I might have convinced him to support the union. <sup>44</sup>

There was supposed to be an all hands meeting at President Joe Lopes' house on Benjarn Road that evening, to decide the Udorn chapter's final position and await the outcome of other stations' actions prior to 2400 hours (FEPA members were no longer allowed to use Air America facilities.) All members were advised to attend.

While we were on the way home and still in the mountains, Wayne Knight called diverting us to Luang Prabang. Cates was assigned to RON at the royal capital with the ship; I was ordered to join Phil Payton in Papa Hotel Echo and RTB. I was a little suspicious of this unanticipated move and wondered if Wayne and Al had previously hatched some special agreement to keep him out of the "shot pattern".

Payton and I arrived in Udorn well after dark. (Papa Hotel Alpha, six plus five, fifteen landings; PHE, one plus forty, one plus thirty night.) It was almost eight o'clock when I left the Air America facility in the B-bus for home. I was bone-tired, hungry, and frustrated, drained, and upset over the entire FEPA/Company confrontation.

I ate quickly, showered, changed clothes, and made my way across the Nong Khai highway. It was only a relatively short distance across a small triangle of land to Benjarn Road. The

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<sup>44</sup> Years later Al Cates informed me that a total of sixty percent of Udorn and system wide pilots had signed a statement agreeing that they would not strike. This Company divide and conquer mechanism was unknown to the Author, who believed at the time that Udorn was the strongest of any station in supporting the union.

walk took me between Khun Yai's sister's property, the Esso station, and past Jit and "One-Arm" Nakon Musagablert's home to the Lopes' residence. It was quite late, and the well-attended meeting had been in progress for some time. As I stood in the back of the room, the general tone still seemed upbeat. The majority of helicopter pilots canvassed professed supporting the standdown notice and would refuse to fly the next day.

Rumors from other stations had not been encouraging over the past week, but it was believed that strong support from the Udorn chapter would be sufficient to carry the day. For this reason, Udorn would be the last base to declare its intention.

At the eleventh hour, word arrived that the majority of pilots at Saigon and Vientiane had refused to stand down. Although somewhat anticipated, it was still shocking. We all felt betrayed, especially since it was the disgruntled fixed wing pilot group who had first envisioned and performed the groundwork for the union. I was extremely proud of our guys. Despite helicopter pilots' customary divisions and inability to agree on many subjects, most of us generally stuck together until the bitter end.

Even with the lack of support from other bases, many of the stronger union types, thinking the Udorn chapter could turn the situation around, still wanted to walk out. Despite the heat of the moment, this was unrealistic. After we cooled down and a modicum of reason returned to the group, it was decided there was no other option than to capitulate.

Released from the high tension of the previous week, the atmosphere in the room became highly charged and emotional. It became obvious that the Company had not waged a fair fight, and the odds were stacked against us from the beginning of the latest negotiations. Many were so angry that they talked about quitting. Indeed, Bill Johnson and Leon Lashomb had already

terminated and left that same day. After many departed the meeting, Joe Lopes broke down and cried. With tears cascading down his cheeks, he indicated that he did not know what he would do. Obviously, Joe had invested so much of his energy and life in the Association that I felt sorry for him. Moreover, it was embarrassing to witness a strong man emotionally dissolve in front of you.

Privately, I was happy that the present acrimony and stress was over, as now perhaps I could obtain a good night's sleep. It had been a protracted and very unpleasant period, one that developed into pure hate and recrimination among some in our group, which would not dissipate for many months. People just did not trust each other anymore, particularly those individuals from the Vientiane base.<sup>45</sup>

On Wednesday the 24th, just prior to the deadline hour specified in the 22nd Abadie letter, I entered the Administration/Operations building in full uniform. I expected a flood of people, but everything appeared quiet and the halls were empty as I sidled into the chief pilot office. On a positive note, Wayne was at his desk looking tired, but apparently cheerful. Despite his demeanor, I felt sullied, like an ancient slave or barbarian forced to walk under the "Roman Yoke" of submission. Cordiality prevailed, likely because management jobs depended on our work ethic for continuance of

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<sup>45</sup> In retrospect, FEPA leaders should have settled for the original proposed plan, as we received a massive pay cut. But then loving the job, I had always indicated that I would work for nothing.

the Company. <sup>46</sup> I said that I was reporting ready to work. As there was nothing scheduled, I left the office without engaging in small talk.

FEPA was broken as a viable entity and never regained its previous stature. Without the power of arbitration, we were at the mercy of the Company, and would have to wait and see what would develop.

Within a reasonable time, an information flyer was issued to all pilots delineating "*the terms and conditions of your continued employment.*" Major areas of concern were briefly addressed, with details to be worked out "*after the present situation has stabilized.*"

Many former provisions remained the same. In my case, because of longevity, at least temporarily I was to receive nearly the same pay as before. However, prerequisites for paid instructor pilots were phased out.

Normal seniority remained the same, "*with [the caveat] that additional qualifications which will be stipulated by the Company for bidding, upgrading, and displacement and which will be promulgated on an Ad Hoc basis in each required instance.*"

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<sup>46</sup> EW Knight Emails, 12/21/00, 12/22/00. Wayne was never a union man and did not believe he could have supported FEPA in any situation. Ed Reid was the only line pilot he recalled who remained non-involved with the union. Throughout the negotiations, since he was a member of management, Knight tried to remain calm and detached as much as possible. He was definitely pro-Company, but did not believe it was in anyone's interest to cause a festering sore among people who depended so much on each other, so he kept his allegiances low key. He never pressured anyone to give in to the Company, but Abadie did. He gave Al Cates an unmercifully hard time one day in his presence. Al was the only pilot he heard Ab minister to.

Wayne was quite proud of how nearly all pilots conducted themselves on the morning of the 24th. There were only a couple sore losers. Jon Stewart was one. He would not look at Wayne or speak. Brian Johnson, on the other hand, was a pleasant surprise. He had cut his hair. He walked up and smiled, shook Wayne's hand and said, "*Captain Knight, you won and we lost. Where do you want me to go boss?*"

Special Project activity was abrogated regarding seniority. Seniority provisions were ended. Nationality remained a qualification in any area necessary. Of course, with the legalese and innuendoes contained in the memorandum, it was easy to speculate that much of the narrative was a stopgap preceeding major change. <sup>47</sup>

### **UNWANTED NOTORIETY**

Alerted by Air America management of the impending clash between contenders, the press eagerly awaited the outcome of the proposed pilot industrial action. Within a day, the *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, a military oriented newspaper, reported from Saigon, South Vietnam:

*"Air America pilots here have been told the only way to avoid being fired in a current contract dispute is to report for work Wednesday morning, a civilian source said Tuesday.*

*'Everyone was terminated and the only way to lift the termination is to go back to work, the civilian pilot who flies for Air American, Inc. said.*

*The U.S. Embassy warned us that if we didn't show up for work, we would be subject to arrest by Vietnamese authorities because it's against the law to strike in Vietnam, the pilot said.'*

*Talks on a contract dispute between the airline and the Far East Pilots Association (FEPA) broke down this week over the seniority issue. Negotiations had been going on since November 20. Involved are contract pilots for the airline which supports U.S. Central Intelligence Agency-backed military operations in Vietnam, Thailand, and Cambodia.*

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<sup>47</sup> We not only lost our union, but final negotiations had also been expensive. I was assessed 370 dollars to pay for the services of our professional negotiator.

*FEPA leaders have also been ordered by Air America to clear union files out of a small headquarters at Tan Son Nhut AB, he said.*

*Several pilots have decided to resume flying on schedule Wednesday, he said, and local leaders of the FEPA have "just lost hope."*<sup>48</sup>

News of the proposed strike continued working its way through the system. Within a relatively short time the Newark Star Ledger published a lengthy and more detailed article relating to Air America and the contract problems:

*"Air America, the Southeast Asia airline widely reported to be an arm of the Central Intelligence Agency, has managed to squelch a strike by its 450 highly paid pilots.*

*The modern-day soldier-of-fortune style pilots were told, a government source said, they would be fired within 48 hours and replaced by others if they struck over their increased wage demands.*

*They obeyed the ultimatum the source said, because they found out they have no kind of job security either under the Civil Service laws for government employees or under the National Labor Relations Act for private employees.*

*An attorney employed in the Washington [D.C.] office of Air America, Clyde Carter, said the pilots signed a new contract two weeks ago 'after we informed them that we had plans for continued operations' whether or not they went on strike.'*

*Carter said that the new contract is generally similar to most commercial airline pilot contracts except that it can only be enforced by proceedings in the court systems of Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Nationalist China, and South Vietnam.*

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<sup>48</sup> *Pacific Stars and Stripes, 01/25/73, Fly or be Fired, Pilots Told.*



*Carter said no one knows how a contested grievance would be handled by the Southeast Asian courts because there never has been a contested grievance under prior contracts.*

*The pilots' job security problems stem from the legal character of Air America, which claims to be a private corporation and air carrier, incorporated in Delaware. It has its main headquarters in Taiwan with subsidiary offices in Bangkok, Vientiane, and Saigon.*

*According to government sources and numerous new accounts, Air America is really operated by the CIA and its main business is flying supplies and personnel into clandestine CIA camps in Southeast Asia. When necessary, it is said to be able to lease from the military the most sophisticated and secret types of aircraft.*

*A government source, friendly with several of the pilots, claimed they are really 'government employees' entitled to the protection of the Civil Service Act or at least the source said, the rights of private unionized employees of a 'government-chartered corporation' covered by the National Labor Relations Act." <sup>49</sup>*

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<sup>49</sup> Jack C. Landau, *Star Ledger*, Washington Bureau, *Reputed CIA Arm Crushes Strike by Pilots*.

Author Note: Carter's statement may or may not be considered valid and reliable.

The reference to Air America pilots as Soldiers of Fortune (SOF) is deceptive. To be maligned by Soldier-of-Fortune allegations has been addressed and disputed by the Author in another book. The pejorative term was likely coined during the American Voluntary Group (AVG), Flying Tigers era in China as plausible deniability by rear echelon types to describe and justify foreign "civilian" intervention in war zones to the public. In both the AVG and Air America organizations, a majority of pilots were former military types and devoted American patriots. I and other former Air America employees still maintain that we were indeed government employees in a civilian role instituting USG policy, one the U.S. military was not overtly allowed to perform under the 1962 Accords in neutral Laos. Unfortunately, this supposition is still in abeyance. It took many years for the CIA finally to acknowledge Air America as its special paramilitary arm with a

Even before the threat of industrial action news articles were published about Air America and its pilots with a pre-FEPA standdown interview with Base Manager of Vientiane, Jim Cunningham. Despite being fraught with inaccuracies, to the uninitiated and although dated by a year, it was somewhat interesting and informative mostly regarding fixed wing pilots:<sup>50</sup>

*"They fly long hours in the flak-filled skies of Laos and play hard in exotic fleshpots like Madam Lulu's, the Purple Porpoise and the White Rose.*

*But the swashbuckling façade of Air America pilots often hides men with mortgages, sagging waistlines and even grandchildren. The soldiers of fortune are going gray. They now have something to lose.*

*If they get shot down, their lives are only worth two kilograms-about four and a half pounds of gold. This company reward, offered to primitive hill tribesmen for surviving crew members, would be worth about \$3,300 on European markets.*

*'The average age of my pilots is 43...They're still wild, some of them still break the rules all the time and fly by the seat of their pants. But they're also family men with business interests.*

*We have young guys, but we also have men in their 50s-old China hands who're not here for the money but because they like the Orient. Their wives and children are here. This is their home.'*

*Since March 1970, all professional fliers in Indochina have had to belong to the Far East Pilots Association.*

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commemorative coin for former employees. Perhaps, after we have all departed this earth, USG officials will recognize us for who we truly represented and for our contribution to the war effort...

<sup>50</sup> Reporters were not allowed to interview management or pilots at the Udorn base.

'There's no room any more for the quick-buck artists who dropped in to make a pile and quit. Our union takes care of that.'

Often called the CIA airline because of its contract work for Washington's paramilitary involvement in Laos, Air America has 125 pilots flying 35 fixed wing planes and 36 Thailand based helicopters.

As a civilian contractor, it takes orders from the U.S. Agency for International Development. Cunningham pooh-poohs talk of clandestine 'spook missions' and 'black operations' allegedly performed in China and North Vietnam.

'That's a lot of drivel. We haul passengers, fuel, and supplies-any cargo required by the services of this country. I'm not saying there isn't a CIA presence in Laos. But if I found any of my pilots taking orders from the CIA, they'd get canned.

You see those planes out there? At 125 knots they wouldn't last five minutes over China or North Vietnam.

However, the pilots have some pretty spooky passengers on occasion-strange Americans with code names, unidentified Asians from several different countries, men with guns who ask to be landed at little-known airstrips in the jungled mountains behind enemy lines.'

"I don't know who they are and I don't want to know," said one pilot.

Pilots have also helped rescue downed U.S. Air Force fliers. Cunningham claims they are far more effective than the military's Jolly Green Giant helicopters based in Thailand.

Flying in high-risk areas and earning night differential, some of the pilots knock back \$40,000 a year.

Chinese road-building activity in the northwest corner of Laos, Hanoi's dry-season offensive in the northeast, and stepped-up activity on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the southern

*Panhandle give communist-led forces effective control of two-thirds of the country.*

*Air America has lost five planes in the past two months and had nearly 50 shot up by antiaircraft fire.”*<sup>51</sup>

## **CHINOOKS**

On the 25th, in response to minor communist activity west of Udorn, using CH-47 815864, Kanach and Knight ferried Thai troops into the area. (Forty-five minutes.)

Two days later, the same crew in 815857, after loading at Long Tieng, conducted night air drops in the Bouam Long area.

They RTB Udorn with seven plus thirty-five hours.<sup>52</sup>

Captain Bill Pearson's defective eyesight continued to plague him. On the morning of the 29<sup>th</sup>, two CH-47C Chinook crews were working out of Vang Vieng supporting the Route 7/13 Sala Phu Khoun operation. Scratch Kanach, PIC of 68-15857 (Ed Reid First Officer, Dave Crowell and R. Stewart Flight Mechanic-kickers) was in the refueling area when Bill Pearson, PIC of 68-15992 (First Officer Bob Braithwaite, Flight Mechanics Jan Meyers and B Yumskulna) taxied too close, meshing rotor blades with 857. A two-rotor system (tandem) machine, the front rotor

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<sup>51</sup> *The Star Ledger, Vientiane, Laos, 01/28/72, Devil-May-Care Yanks Roam Laotian Skies: Vintage pilots fly spooky missions for 'CIA airline.'"*

<sup>52</sup> EW Knight Emails, 12/23/00, 07/11/01.  
Unable to make satisfactory inroads into the strong Bouam Long defenses, the enemy began a phased withdrawal and ceased their offensive on the site by 1 February 1973.  
The introduction of Hooks and availability of shock troops earlier in the war might have had impact during the rainy season around enemy flanks. Lightning strike artillery missions might have disrupted projected enemy operations. However, there is general agreement that the war's general trend would not have been much affected.  
Victor Anthony & Richard Sexton, *The USAF in Southeast Asia: The War in Northern Laos 1954-1973* (Washington: Center for Air Force History, 1973), 360.

blade system of 992 and the rear blades of 857 were badly damaged, resulting in grounding of both helicopters. As this was Pearson's second taxi accident, he was downgraded to First Officer for a time.<sup>53</sup>

## **RETURN TO THE FIELD**

The day after walking under the Roman Yoke, the principal mission on the Agency docket was explained to me in Buddy Rogers' office. Apparently, the intermediate ADR receiver/transmitter (ADR-2), located north of Thakhet between the Vinh tap and Nakhon Phanom, was not completely functional. Therefore, our primary mission would be to reorient or replace the antenna. With the North Vietnamese intent on invading populated areas closer to the Mekong River town before a Lao ceasefire was announced, the ADR site, although situated deep in denied area near enemy LOCs, was considered reasonably devoid of enemy troops. But one never knew the actual hazards involved, and that was the reason we were paid handsome mission wages, and primarily conducted night operations.

*"I guess the peace [accord] was signed yesterday [I was two days premature]. I will have to go into the field to see how many of our chaps got shot at today. Laos is horrible and I can't see it changing any time soon. I feel that we will have work here for some time. If I told you what our people have to face you probably wouldn't believe me."*

Letter Home 01/25/73.

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<sup>53</sup> EW Knight Emails, 12/22/00, 12/23/00 regarding his January logs and Chinook flights. This was Braithwaite's second taxi accident, as he had torn the tail off a Huey in the Wattay Airport parking area. Pearson was reverted to first Officer and seemed to take it well. Air America XOXO accident report for 992 and 857, 01/29/73, Knight.

As usual letters between Dad and me crossed:

*"I know it has been ages since I last wrote you and I sincerely apologize [Dad had the flu for three weeks]..*

*Glad you all had a nice time over and after Christmas. Strange to celebrate in a warm climate..*

*Do the boys love their little sister? She is such a little doll and I hope to see her before she graduates from high school. Pete sure looks like Atlas in miniature. A rugged individual if ever there was one. Ricky does look for a need to be built up with puddings. Tuie sure looks in good health..*

*Now the big item of the day was last night's announcement of a ceasefire this Saturday. I do not imagine that this is the end of all hostilities, but it could make a difference in the way it affects you and others. Will be interested to hear your angle on this (Dad was totally unaware of my participation in the Special Project intelligence gathering operation)."*

Letter from Home, 01/24/73.

Monday the 26th I checked into the Air America facility at 1145 hours prepared for a lengthy RON at LS-444 (commonly referred to as PS-44). I was assigned Papa Hotel Delta to check functioning of the recently-installed LORAN equipment. After a thirty-minute FCF, the machine did not properly meet all airworthy requirements. Therefore, I was reassigned Papa Hotel Alpha with Dan Zube and Deak Kennedy. I had flown with Dan the previous year after he arrived from Saigon and had ample seniority to rate a First Officer position in the S-58T program. Now, because of experienced personnel transfer to the Chinook program, there was a need for new blood in the Twinpac Special Project, and Zube more than adequately filled this requirement.

Following a 220 nautical mile flight southeast over the fallow rice fields of Thailand, we arrived at the Pakse airport



A dry season view of the mighty Mekong River winding south toward Pakse between Thailand to the right and Laos to the left bank.

Author Collection.

toward evening. As the aircraft was being serviced, we traveled across the bridge spanning the Se Kong and through town in the Company Jeep to the Air America hostel, where we ate dinner with other helicopter pilots. With our next mission scheduled during nighttime hours, we commenced night proficiency, LORAN, and crew coordination training. Later we RON at PS-44. (Three plus forty-five, two plus ten night.) Training and overnights at PS-44 continued for the next seven days.

The next day a ceasefire agreement was implemented by principals in Paris. Representatives of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DVR), The Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam (PRG, or the political wing of the Viet Cong), the government of the Republic of Vietnam, and the United States of America signed a document officially titled "The Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam."

Time was considered short. To minimize enemy assets, certain to flood across the border into Laos from South Vietnam, a Lao ceasefire was scheduled for Military Region Four deemed important to the government. Despite previous see-saw victories at Khong Sedone, Paksong, and Saravane, consistent with last minute land grabs, the North Vietnamese leadership continued feeding reinforcements into the L-44 and Bolovens areas.

Constantly under enormous enemy pressure, General Soutchay's two government regiments tasked to defend Saravane began moving westward. In order to reinforce these units and stem a major withdrawal, another government regiment (GM-43) was directed to move from the Thateng area toward Saravane from the east. During the same time period, two regiments (GM-41 and 42) marched toward the town and airfield from the west. <sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 397.



The western unit soon discovered what was considered the largest ammunition cache near the Route-23-Sedone River crossing west of Lima-44. Unable to destroy the find, they requested two B-52 strikes to perform the job. <sup>55</sup>

Air America helicopters and crews participated in the friendly movement on the 27th. Working for Jim Butler, the Pakse air operations specialist (called "The Gray Fox"), we acted as SAR for H-34 crews moving troops toward and into Saravane. Kennedy, the mission designated minigun gunner for his expertise with weapons, mounted the bulky device in the cabin at PS-44 for potential suppressive fire in the event of a downed ship and a challenged recovery attempt. Fortunately, the special mission was conducted without incident, and the gun's presence remained concealed from most individuals. <sup>56</sup>

Afterward, we continued our self-directed day-night training regimen. (Eight plus fifteen, two plus thirty night, ten landings.) Since future missions warranted a full complement of our bag of tricks, we also trained with night vision glasses. Training resumed on Sunday, with emphasis on day and night confined and rough area landings. (Eight plus twenty, three hours night, twenty landings.)

Following his Chinook mating experience at Vang Vieng on the 29th, and the day before the proposed ADR mission, Scratch Kanach arrived with his Twinpac crew for a warm-up, and to prepare for the specified ADR work north of Thakhet. Even though

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<sup>55</sup> *CHECO* (U.S. Army Center of Military History, Washington, D.C., *Indochina Monographs*, Soutchay Vongsavanh, *RLG Military Operations and Activities in the Laotian Panhandle*, 84, 85-the work was provided to the Author by Frank Stergar.

<sup>56</sup> To the naïve world, Air America flight crews were still purported to be unarmed civilians performing USAID work in a neutral country. In addition to my AK-47, Deak Kennedy also had a M-60 machine gun and ammunition stashed in the cabin section as backup to the minigun.

Scratch was now deeply imbedded in the Chinook program, it appeared that, at least for the near term, as the senior and most experienced Special Project pilot, he would remain the Agency's principal in future Twinpac Special Project operations.

Testing the water, I had conducted a little practice recently in hooking a wooden ADR to the rescue hoist and deploying it from a hover into the canopy of a tree. However, I was probably not deemed sufficiently experienced and fully ready to perform actual missions. Therefore, at least temporarily, I was relegated to SAR duties and a number two backup role. I had not seen or talked to Kanach since our minor disagreement just prior to the projected FEPA standdown. Nevertheless, I was happy that he was present, for, like a lucky piece, the man lent a modicum of added confidence, and bolstered certainty for mission success.

We shared airspace with Kanach and his crew throughout the day and night. (Five plus fifty, fifty minutes night, ten landings.)

The good news from the Ubon USAF meteorology department was that weather and moon conditions were projected to be suitable for a mission to go on the 30th

Late Wednesday morning, after last minute practice, and thorough navigation and equipment checks, we repositioned to our launch point at the Nakhon Phanom Air Force Base (T-55). Even though the airfield was largely divorced from ever-present outside prying eyes, we parked in a secure inner, fenced-off area devoted to concealing special mission preparations. While waiting for our final launch orders, we consumed a late lunch in the officers' mess, and were joined by Twin Otter Captain Jim Pearson and Barney Heidt. Flying 868, Jim would be tasked to provide weather assessments, act as a radio relay platform, and closely monitor the operation. At the appropriate time, a



We had to be ready for anything Special Project work offered. Rocky terrain features in the PS-44 area of southern Laos were often used for rough area landings (RAL) during our day and night training sessions.

Author Collection.

technician onboard his plane would provide read-outs for ADR signal orientation. I was not sure if he would carry Commando Raiders that night to assist in the event of a downed Twinpac.

Late in the evening, while I flew pre-planned racetrack patterns within radio range and acceptable rescue distance from the ADR site, Scratch did what he could to orient the ADR so signals would continue to flow from the Vinh tap through the antennas to Nakon Phanom electronic receivers.

While Captain Jim Pearson headed west for Udorn (four plus ten, three plus twenty-three night), we turned south and landed at PS-44 just after midnight (Nine plus twenty-five, three plus five night.) <sup>57</sup>

## **NEXT MISSION**

At some point, I gained a smattering of information regarding our next mission, one similar to the semi-successful Hughes-500P Vinh phone tap operation. With a Lao ceasefire imminent, Washington hierarchy at Langley headquarters was interested in what Vietnamese leaders were planning regarding negotiations and intention to adhere to any lasting bargain.

There was about a month delay before the Sam Neua phone tap mission unfolded, but when the military situation around Bouam Long improved somewhat, largely because of accurate all-weather USAF F-111 participation, the intelligence gathering mission planned to take place in Military Region Two's upper Houa Phong (Sam Neua Province) moved into high gear.

Planned in phases, the major operation would first require insertion of an elite eight-man commando team to provide security and mount glass tap insulators containing miniature receiver/transmitters on phone lines strung along the north side

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<sup>57</sup> Jim Pearson FEPA log for 01/30/73.

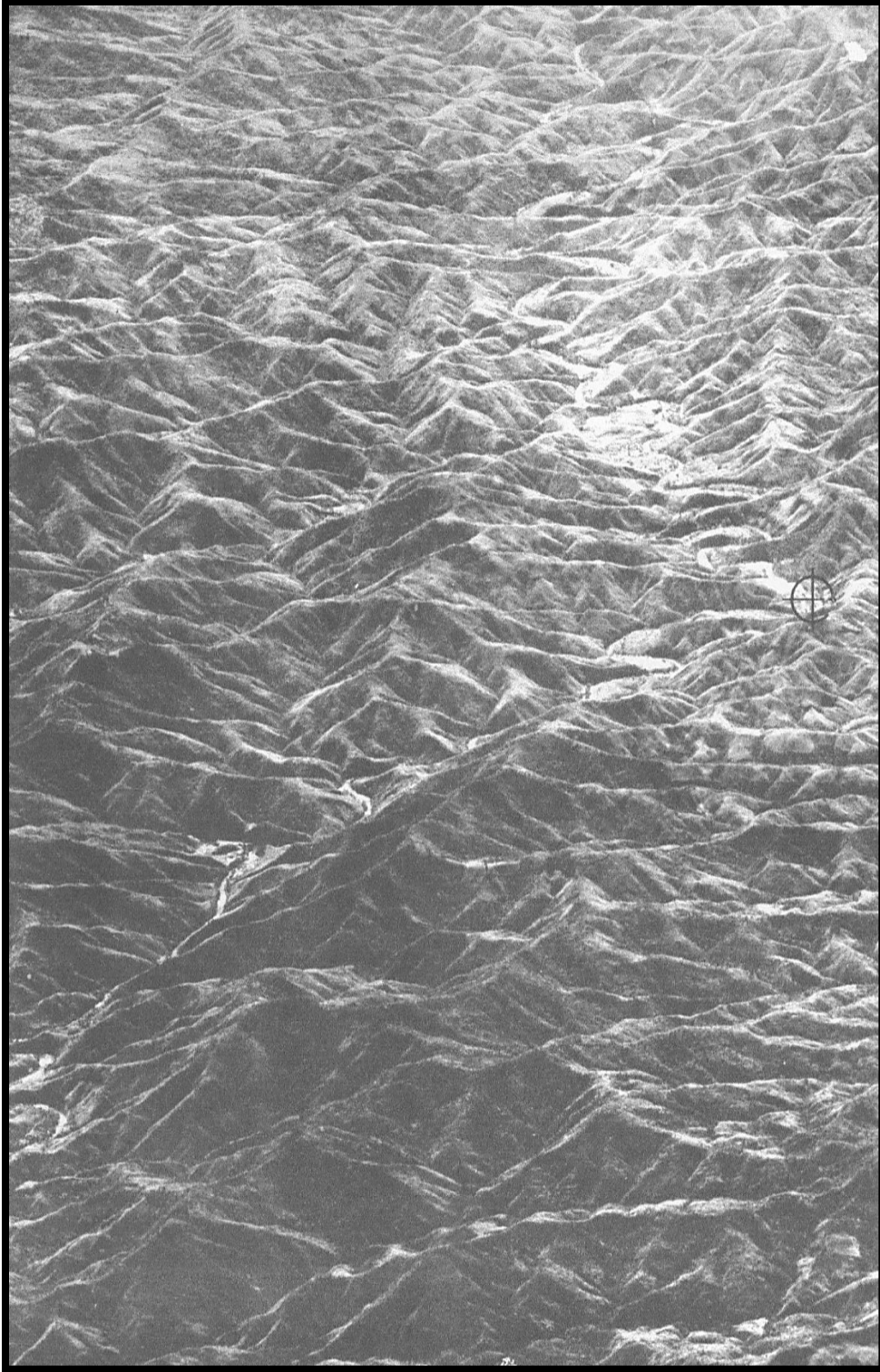
of Route-65 from North Vietnam to provincial Pathet Lao headquarters in well-established caves at Ban Nakay Neua (VH195570), east of Sam Neua Town. After the tap was installed, secure, and sending signals, a solar powered ADR would be placed on previously selected high ground relatively close to the tap to ensure essential line-of-sight transmission.

From onset of the mission, major long-term challenges and months of difficult work lay ahead. Even at conception, the plan presented a highly ambitious and aggressive exploit, encompassing a hostile area with which we were somewhat familiar from previous road watch team sorties. Discounting an enemy presence, local terrain was very harsh. Miles and miles of soaring mountains, and ridges blanketed by trees and heavy vegetation inundated the region. Ravines, rivers, narrow and wide valleys containing tribal villages, proliferated along major and minor enemy arteries. But the wizards in Rogers' office and the technical devices department, which we called the "Skunk Works," believed our team could perform anything and everything they conjured and asked us to perform. <sup>58</sup>

The last day in January, following a long respite from the "Sneaky Pete" work, we resumed training for the new mission. Flight Mechanic Bill Long replaced Kennedy, who joined Kanach's team.

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<sup>58</sup> Special Project missions were interesting, and becoming more addictive. Consequently, believing that I was contributing to the greater cause, I looked forward to participating in whatever task the Agency folks proposed.



Overhead topography photograph of harsh terrain in a portion of upper Military Region Two shows mountains, ravines, streams, a narrow river valley, and hamlets.

*"There is not much news to relate. You probably know more about the war situation than we do. Happy the lads [POWs] held in escrow are to come home."*

Letter from home, 02/10/73.

**M**indful of the upcoming Sam Neua mission, day and night training sessions at PS-44 continued at a relatively normal pace that included all aspects of LORAN, ADR, NVG, and crew coordination training. This was interspaced with periods of good food, beer, stress-relieving sessions on the gun range, outdoor movies, and sleep.

Captain Hank Edwards arrived as the Twinpac program's latest Special Project pilot. Months before, Hank had approached Wayne Knight in the Rendezvous Club Animal Bar indicating that if there ever was an opening, he would be interested in becoming a member of the small elite unit. Wayne passed Hank's name to AB-1. He was vetted by Rogers' organization, and when a vacancy occurred, he was in. At one time during the depressing dark days of the difficult log mission in Sam Neua, exacerbated by the LORAN problems, I privately asked Wayne to be replaced. I knew Hank was interested in the program and thought he could be the next person to take my place. After I had my say, I never broached the subject again, and both of us conveniently forgot my request.

I sandwiched both Zube and Edwards into day-night practice sessions. (Nine plus five, two plus forty-five night, twenty landings.) Since Hank was new in the program, I concentrated on

instructing him in LORAN electronic functions and LORAN map reading navigation and crew coordination. <sup>1</sup>

### **HUP GENERAL THEP**

On the second, I repositioned Papa Hotel Alpha to Pakse with Edwards and Bill Long, to be relieved by incoming crewmembers Scratch Kanach, Al Cates, and Chuck Low. <sup>2</sup> Since there was nothing scheduled north, I went to the hostel for lunch, where I discovered there were eight pilots and Flight Mechanics who were also rotating back to Udorn. Because of Pakse's remoteness, RONS were often extended in the south, so some bright individual--perhaps Dick Elder--anxious to get home had suggested that we purchase tickets to Vientiane on Royal Air Lao, a commercial airline owned by Lao elite.

We began boarding, but when the mechanics lifted their heavy tool boxes, personal weapons, and suitcases up the mobile staircase into the plane they were informed that they would have to purchase two extra tickets. Taking exception to the demand, we insisted that everything would easily fit into the cloak closet. Our entreaty was rejected. We all had luggage, therefore, the refusal to take the gear so incensed all of us that we collectively cancelled and refunded our tickets. Despite being a money-losing organization, loss of our revenue did not seem to concern the airline people. <sup>3</sup>

We felt good supporting our Flight Mechanics, but we might have cut off our noses to spite our faces. It was Friday afternoon, and Pakse was at the extreme end of the line for air

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<sup>1</sup> EW Knight Email, 12/23/00. Hank Edwards was interested in the Special Project, so Wayne had Edwards vetted through Buddy Rogers' office and offered him a slot when a vacancy opened.

<sup>2</sup> Al Cates February 1973 log entries. They remained in the area until the 4th.

<sup>3</sup> CASI pilot Al Adolph, who we all knew and liked, flew for Royal Air Lao.



traffic. Additionally, the daily milk run and supply deliveries had already been accomplished that morning. Backed up against the weekend, a historically bad time for air arrivals, our chances for a flight home any time soon appeared exceedingly dim. Moreover, it marked my eighth day in the field. I was out of clean clothes, and standing on the laterite parking ramp in the scorching sun did absolutely nothing to improve my disposition. Some of the less stalwart in our group gave up in despair and decided to return to the Air America hostel. Later, when all hope seemed lost, CU-XWPBV an unscheduled CASI C-46D arrived and the pilot agreed to take us to Vientiane. (One plus fifty-four.)

At Wattay Airport it was the same situation. No foreseeable flights to Udorn. As the crews scattered, some pilots resigned to RON in Vientiane and went to town to buy gold or play with the girls. Others opted for the air-conditioned snack bar to wait. Having spent more hours than I cared to count in the field, and not having to suffer deadhead blues since being in the Special Project, I had been spoiled. I was frustrated, hot, and bothered. After leaving word with an operations clerk to contact me if something developed, I headed for the Air America gedunk for a cool one.

While walking the short distance between the Operations Building and Papa Chu's restaurant, I encountered Volpar Captain Frank Bonasinga. Striking up a conversation with Frank, I discovered that he had been ferrying Thai officers associated

with the Thai Unity program and had General THEP with him.<sup>4</sup> Although this was a VIP flight, Frank indicated he had plenty of room and, as far as he was concerned, I could return to Udorn with him. Reassured, I informed operations of this and again headed for the snack bar. Since it was late afternoon, the establishment was nearly deserted. While basking in the blessed air conditioning, I ordered a frosty bottle of Heinekens beer to quench my thirst. The delicious brew went down far too quickly. Alcohol was rapidly adsorbed through my stomach's dehydrated cells and tissues into my blood stream, and circulated to my brain. The near-term effect on me was akin to what Tony Byrne long ago coined as "Two Beer Casterlin."

Somewhat refreshed, I decided that I had better check on my ride south. When I was on the stoop of the side door facing the operations building, a diminutive clerk approached with a message. He somewhat tactfully informed me that I would not be going south with the Thais. The general did not want me onboard **his** airplane. This turn of events was like a slap in the face and not something I wanted to hear. That miserable bastard! After hauling his crying, sniveling ass out of the Ban Na Puncher position under fire...At this point, all the day's frustrations and my little beer buzz gushed forth. Without even considering or weighing the consequences, I boomed in my clearest, finest, and loudest voice, **"Well, fuck General THEP!"** The outburst was a form of catharsis. After venting my emotions

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<sup>4</sup> THEP, AKA General Vitoon Yasawat, based at Headquarters 333 in Udorn from the early days, Vitoon was responsible for all Thai troops assigned to support the war in Laos. Dick Elder, Bob Noble, and I had delivered Vitoon to Puncher, a Thai artillery fire support base at Ban Na (LS-15) during a very tenuous time. We also retrieved him under heavy enemy artillery fire. The experience affected him greatly, so for our efforts that day each member of the crew was awarded a letter of commendation from the Thai Prime Minister and a distinctive cigarette lighter.

and feeling considerably better, I wheeled about angrily on the balls of my feet and reentered the cool snack bar.

Now I was back to square one. No ride. No prospects of one. Mentally, I was worse off than before when I at least had a few minutes of believing I was headed home.

Soon afterward, I was offered, and caught a twenty-five-minute ride on CASI C-47A XW-PDE. It was sad that we had to depend on a competitor for deadhead rides.

About 1730, we entered the chocks near the Customer's Q warehouse, where a blue Volkswagen bus driver waited to take me to operations. After a frustrating day of getting jerked around, I was really happy to be back in Udorn. Now I could go home to my family and hopefully enjoy a day off.

The hellish day was not over. While I walked down the narrow hall past the long operations counter, the Thai clerk on duty asked me subtly in soft tones if I had left something in Vientiane. Knowing that I had all my gear, I still looked down at the valise, helmet bag, and AK-47 case at my feet. All appeared in order. What the hell was the man talking about? When I probed him further, smiling in an inscrutable Asian manner, he ceased being so obscure. Then, getting closer to the point, he asked if I had said something in Vientiane. All this was highly confusing. At this point, I was home safely, and even the past few minutes had been forgotten. I actually did not have a clue as to what the clerk was alluding. Finally, giving up all pretense of Oriental beating-around-the-bush, he indicated that, apparently, I had said something derogatory while at Wattay Airport, and one of General THEP's angry officers was on the telephone wanting to talk to me. Now recalling what I had said, my frustrated, beer-fueled outburst came flooding back.

I tentatively accepted the phone, anticipating the worst. An English-speaking officer indicated that he and his peers had

overheard my derogatory expletive regarding the general. Considering my action a supreme sign of disrespect in a country where respect was everything, they wanted me out of Thailand in twenty-four hours. Oh boy! It seemed like the Casterlin mouth had once again emerged to cause trouble. Would I ever learn? What had been seemingly a natural and simple outburst on my part now had implications of a very serious nature.

Realizing that a significant face issue was involved, I had to quickly devise a plausible explanation. I attempted to explain my actions saying that I was only joking, that it was a form of American humor--a major falsehood. Then I apologized in my most contrite and suave manner. The officer seemed partially placated by my soothing words. We terminated the call, and I hoped the incident would pass. However, I was not sure, so I ambled down the hall to talk to Chief Pilot Knight. After hearing details of the incident, Wayne's face broke into a grin that could not have been any broader if he had tried. He indicated that he would talk to AB-1 Chief Pat Landry and see what he could do to smooth any ruffled feathers. I hung around long enough to discover that Landry considered the story quite amusing. Moreover, during his long association with Vitoon, he also believed the general could be a supreme prick at times.

Despite some anxious reflection on my part, that was the last I heard from the Thai Army people. Apparently, I had gotten away with cursing and disrespecting a top royal Thai army general. It was an interesting story, one I judiciously related several times. Whenever I arrived at the critical point in the story and the children were present, I substituted, "Hup General THEP" for the actual gutter language I employed at the time. For some reason, Ricky liked the phrase and repeated "Hup General

THEP" for a long time. Naturally, when he said this in front of guests, I was obliged to relate the story. <sup>5</sup>

### **FAILURE AT MOUNG SOUI**

With Route-13 open and Sala Phou Khoun garrisoned with a fire support base, a Thai-fueled operation to retake enemy-controlled Moung Soui (L-108), located on Route-7 twelve miles northwest of the Plain of Jars began in earnest to choke off further enemy inroads to the west. <sup>6</sup> Leading the charge, Commando Raiders were ferried to a pre-selected position five miles southeast of Lima-108. After the site was secured and a landing zone and perimeter defense established, Air America Chinook crews lifted in two Thai battalions.

With the southern units of Task Force Alpha in place, the northern prong movement was rescheduled to commence on the second, but the mission was actually slipped to the third. Eight helicopters and crews would be involved: Four CH-47s were designated Durax 21-24; four Twinpacs, Durax 31-33.

For coordination, mission segments were timed. In order to satisfy requirements and arrive on station by 0730 to refuel and receive a briefing by Customer Lumberjack (Norm Gardner, monitoring VHF 119.1) at the Vang Vieng Victor-Victor (VV) pad,

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<sup>5</sup> EW Knight Emails, 12/23/00, 07/09/01. Despite the considerable drama, Wayne professed not to recall much of my incident with General Yasawat. He added that if the more approachable AB-1 Chief Bill Lair had still been in charge, he would have been more sympathetic to my predicament than Pat Landry. Knight suspects that the THEP incident was not as critical as I thought.

Author Note: Years later I interviewed Bill Lair in the Montien Hotel restaurant. Bill was staying in a hotel that then retired Vitoon (THEP) owned on Suriwongse Road toward New Road.

<sup>6</sup> This representative special mission constituted a portion of Vang Pao's January-February dry season plan to acquire territory on the flanks of Long Tieng prior to a scheduled ceasefire. Task Force Alpha was conceived as a two-pronged pincer movement to eject Vietnamese forces from Moung Soui.

the armada was scheduled to depart Udorn at dark thirty, the Chinook crews going to Lima-16, the S-58Ts journeying to Long Tieng for a briefing.

The HLZ was selected on elevated ground at TG811680, on the eastern side of the Phou So (LS-57) massif. While the CH-47s departed for their battalion pick-up zone at Shing Scha (LS-339, UH0503) on Phou Cum massif north of the Plain of Jars, with an estimated time of arrival (ETA) of 0845 hours, Twinpac pilots relocated to Sam Tong to load the thirty-one Commando Raider unit tasked to secure the landing zone.<sup>7</sup> Forward Air Ground (FAG) controller Lonestar (122.6) accompanied this first unit.

The S-58T pilots departed for a point six miles north of the landing site to rendezvous with their A-1 escort--six Hobo planes 01 through 06, who were scheduled as cover for the entire mission--and FAC Raven-26. A Porter pilot acted as the command-and-control ship for the Customer with the call sign Elephant Control. The Commando Raider insertion time was scheduled for 0855.

Customer John Scott (AKA Junkyard, VHF 125.5, FM 42.80) and FAG Flash Gordon waited at Lima Site-33 to direct the Chinook crews. BC-603B (492 men), with FAG Night Fighter, loaded for the twenty-six nautical mile flight to the primary landing site at 0910. Backed up by radio communications, a Red India would be displayed as the recognition signal. Shuttles continued until the entire battalion was in place.

The next day, regimental headquarters GM-201 (FAG Flash Gordon) and BC-624 (542 troops, FAG Hillbilly) joined BC-603 at the Phou So location. Two prongs of Alpha unit were supposed to

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<sup>7</sup> An alternate helicopter landing zone (HLZ) was selected to the west at TG709657. This position was located on high ground five miles south of Phou Fa (LS-16 which, for obvious reasons was also called Agony by small STOL plane pilots in the early days).

move toward Moung Soui and join forces by the seventh. However, neither column made much progress.

The northern battalions were impacted by enemy 130mm fire, disrupting their plans and greatly affecting morale. To preclude total disorder, an evacuation was begun by Chinook crews, with one battalion positioned to join the southern column. Another battalion was redeployed to the Long Tieng area.

During the movement, Captain Charley Weitz's aircraft was mobbed by well over a hundred troops anxious to be the first to leave. Although probably over grossed for the density altitude, despite the load, Weitz had no problem taking off. <sup>8</sup>

The three remaining battalions failed to retake Moung Soui, and by March the operation was scrubbed and the battalions returned to Sam Tong. <sup>9</sup>

## **MR-1 LAND GRABS**

Except for two fall operations north of Luang Prabang, not much action occurred in the region. Far to the northwest, in Houa Khong Province (more commonly called Nam Tha) minor action waxed and waned in late 1972. Even during the early Bill Young days, fearing Chinese intervention, there was always an invisible dividing line visualized in upper Houa Khong that sizeable government forces normally did not penetrate. Then, with the Henry Kissinger and 1972 Richard Nixon trips to China, and a new understanding reached between the two nations, no longer was there undue U.S. concern about the Chinese Road in

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<sup>8</sup> EW Knight Email.

Author Note: Over the years we had learned to cope with panicked soldiers and refugees indiscriminately mobbing our aircraft. This occurred mostly when not monitored by a Customer, or during especially stressful times.

<sup>9</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 390-391. Conboy provided details involving the northern prong movement of Task Force Alpha.



the Beng Valley that stretched to the Mekong River across from Sayaboury Province.

From the early 1960s, Nam Yu (LS-118A), located north of Ban Houei Sai, had provided a base for guerrilla operations that served the region and supported "Sneaky Pete" cross border forays into Yunnan Province. <sup>10</sup>

Following a largely quiescent period, in late November enemy forces moved south down Route-4 and seized Lao Theung, and held Vien Pou Kha (LS-152) and several other government positions located east-northeast of Nam Yu. Vien Pou Kha changed hands again, but was back in enemy control by January.

Chief loader at Site-118A, Somboon (call sign Hatchet Man), was part Lao, part Thai. Like many devout Buddhists, he wore a gold chain adorned with attached Buddhist images. Hired at a tender age in 1965, Somboon began working for Air America filling fuel drums at or near Chiang Khong (T-516), Thailand. He eventually made his way across the Mekong River to work at Ban Houei Sai L-25), and then north to Nam Yu as an aircraft handler under Piak. When Piak relocated to Ban Houei Sai, Somboon became

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<sup>10</sup> Author Note: When Agency operations expanded to Houa Khong Province (Nam Tha) in northwestern Military Region One, high level permission was granted to find and develop a training base for irregular guerrilla troops. During this early period, USAID representative Joe Flipse, based at Ban Houei Sai (L-25) and Nam Thouei (LS-118), hunted with Yao tribals. Aware of Agency and Case Officer Bill Young's desire to open a suitable site, Joe encountered a choice location less than three miles to the west of Site-118. Well-watered, generally surrounded by protective mountains, it afforded excellent terrain to construct a STOL airstrip. Young concurred with Flipse's assessment, and following a recon in a Helio Courier, dispatched 300 of his most loyal and trusted Lahu to secure and manually begin developing a landing strip. Toward the end of 1964, the Author reconed Nam Yu from the air with Young. This was surprising for Young who harbored an aversion to flying, particularly in a helicopter. Of the two sites, LS-118 was specifically a majority Yao and other minority tribal refugee center, and LS-118A was designed for irregular training. Nam Yu eventually became a large northern complex emulating the one at Long Tieng/Sam Tong.

chief loader working closely with Customer Tony Poe. He noted that Tony was normally inebriated, and as the war escalated, he consumed even more alcohol.

Somboon, a highly trusted employee, hated both corruption and the communists. Harboring no fear of battle, he carried an AK-47 into combat. A valuable asset to the American Case Officers, he knew the various ethnic groups: the Hmien, the Lao Theung, the Lue, the Thai Dam, and their leaders very well. Sometime before the "balloon went up," he apprised Americans assigned to Nam Yu that there were North Vietnamese in the adjoining hills waiting to attack. Despite his repeated warnings, no one would believe him.

Somboon was vindicated on 1 February, when a Pathet Lao force opened their offensive, easily destroying the refugee center at Nam Thouei. On the second, late in the afternoon, with an enemy presence revealed so close to Nam Yu, and with the Case Officers having rotated to Ban Houei Sai for the night, there was an attempt to reinforce Nam Yu. A Thai heavy weapons company was flown in from Xieng Lom and established a hasty defensive perimeter around the airstrip.<sup>11</sup> Although reinforcement was welcome, the effort proved too little, too late, for that night the enemy attacked with probes and skirmishing in the valley.

At first light, communist forces ejected Thai defenders from strategic high ground which had been fortified with an 81mm mortar crew and a 75mm recoilless rifle, and began impacting the airstrip.

By ten in the morning, the Thai defenders were running low on ammunition. Using a tractor, Somboon attempted to haul an artillery piece across the bridge, but found incoming mortar

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<sup>11</sup> Upon hearing about the action at Nam Yu, Tony Poe, former Case Officer at the site, called AB-1 Chief Pat Landry from Pitts Camp, petitioning for permission to help. Since the "die was cast," his request was denied.

fire too intense. Therefore, he headed for the safety of a southern mountain. From this vantage point, he noted enemy moving toward the warehouse and administration building, so he radioed airborne control for an airstrike. The planes made direct hits on the complex.

Despite Allied airstrikes, the friendly forces, both outnumbered and outgunned, opted to withdraw to the south, leaving Nam Yu to the enemy for the first time. As a result, reinforcements en route to Nam Yu, upon learning of the Thai unit's departure from the field, were returned to their base. Upon hearing the news, the population of Ban Houei Sai was relatively unconcerned for Nam Yu was considered too far removed to bother them.

Unfortunately, the fall of Nam Yu was too late in the Second Indochina War's timeline. Following President Nixon's visit to China, it was thought that Nam Yu was no longer important to U.S. interests as a paramilitary base for intelligence gathering and cross border activity. Therefore, so as not to antagonize newly acquired Chinese relations, no serious attempts were conducted to reclaim the site. <sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 392-393.

Warren, William, *A Century and a Half*. "Henry Kissinger had travelled to China to conclude an agreement for each nation to open a liaison office, an embassy in all but name. At the same time Soviet-American relations improved dramatically, possibly related to the Sino-American relations, which pushed Moscow into new flexibility."

USAID Representative John Lesnak's letter.

USAID Representative Vichit Mingrachata interview in Udorn, Thailand.

The Chinese Road in the Beng Valley was no longer a worry. Henry Kissinger had been assured by Chou En-lai that the road would be stopped short of the Thai border. On the basis of this promise, any plans to send troops into the Beng Valley were scrubbed.

**THE SITUATION IN MR-3**

The south was also impacted by military struggles to acquire land in anticipation of a ceasefire. Territory located on Route-9 between Don Hene and Tchepone, Moung Phalane (L-61) airstrip to the east of Savannakhet was in government hands early in December. By the middle of January, heavy fighting was underway by both parties to retain or recapture the town. Allied air strikes took a toll on enemy forces, but after the introduction of fresh artillery, tanks, and Vietnamese infantry, the town was lost by the first week in February. Supported by artillery and air power, efforts by two irregular regiments to regain the town failed, and Moung Phalane was still considered enemy at the time of the ceasefire.

As part of the North Vietnamese plan to seize territory in Borikhane and Khammouane Provinces, Thakhet, the forward site where the Hughes-500P crew staged for the Vinh tap mission, had been under pressure since early December. Pressure continued in the region, but government efforts tended to keep the town free of communists.

**STATUS OF MR-4**

Since the change of government and allied action in Cambodia had dried up communist supply lines from the main port at Sihanoukville and destroyed bases near the border of South Vietnam, the increasingly critical Ho Chi Minh logistical trail system had moved further west in Laos toward populated areas. Because the provincial town of Saravane was located close to communist logistical routes, and enemy leaders were aware that care would be taken not to bomb a civilian center, emphasis was focused on seizing and holding the town.

Action after action had ensued over a two-year period, during which the immediate Saravane area changed hands several

times. Three government regiments rallied and managed to gain a semblance of area control in early February. However, GM-43 encountered a North Vietnamese regiment, and errors in providing timely air support resulted in the communists dispersing the government regiment. Soon afterward, dreaded Vietnamese tanks arrived to drive Lao forces south to Khong Sedone. This marked another major town lost to the communists by the time of the ceasefire.<sup>13</sup>

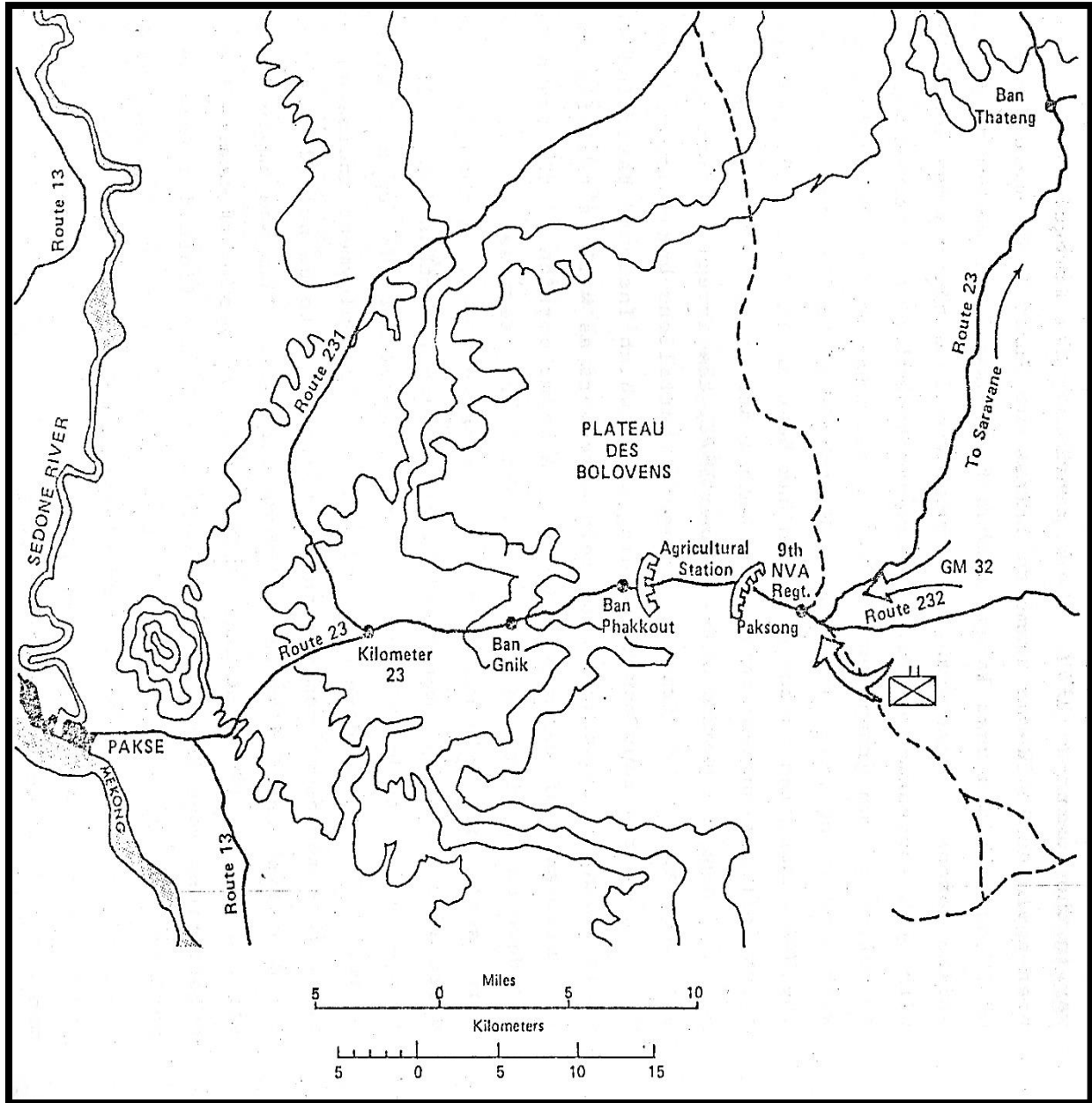
Paksong, the last government bastion on the Bolovens Plateau, was the last impediment to the regional enemy logistical system.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, with little to stop their momentum, the enemy prepared an offensive on the town. On 8 February, supported by six tanks, the Vietnamese attacked. An USAF AC-130 gunship was called in to help, but despite acquiring the targets, was not immediately allowed to engage. Once again, field commanders in the field--in this case the Spectre pilot--were hampered and not allowed to immediately act on real time situations. Politics and strict rules of engagement necessitated a convoluted channel to receive approval to strike. By the time authorization was received, the aircraft had reached bingo fuel state and had to RTB. Positions were lost, as was Paksong.

The enemy had moved heavy artillery into the area, and began pounding friendly troops to the west on Route-23. Without such defenses to block enemy advances, the road to Pakse would be open. Despite some pessimism as to retaking the site, on the 10th, through a combination of USAF assets and numerous sorties,

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<sup>13</sup> Soutchay, *CHECO*, 83.

<sup>14</sup> The Saravane area, and particularly the eastern Bolovens Plateau, had formerly provided Agency-sponsored training bases and important springboards for road watch and aggressive actions against Routes-96, 110, and other communist LOCs. The loss of these two forward areas would almost certainly guarantee that these areas would never again create a supply impediment to the enemy from the ground.



An earlier battle map showing the location of Paksong on the Bolovens and defensive positions to the west on Route-23. Although units may not coincide exactly with 1973 action, topographical elements and basics remained the same.

Soutchay Vongsavanh, RLG Military Operations and Activates in the Laotian Panhandle, 69.

the guns and many enemy troops were destroyed. The back of the Vietnamese offensive had been broken.

By the 12<sup>th</sup>, a Savannakhet SGU unit moved back into Paksong. These troops were supported by FAR units and two Thai fire support bases to the west. The unit remained in the town until the ceasefire-then... <sup>15</sup>

On the fourth, I was back on the flight line training Ben Densley (DOH 09/14/66) and Bart Jealous for First Officer Twinpac duties. As Papa Hotel Alpha was still at PS-44, I used XW-PHE for local training. Deak Kennedy acted as our Flight Mechanic. Although we required new blood to staff normal operations and the S-58T program because of terminations and dislocations, as the date for the Sam Neua tap mission approached, we also required clean, trouble-free ships.

We were busy training all day. In addition to preflight inspections and flying, I conducted detailed emergency procedure schooling in the pilot briefing room across from the operations department. Since the military situation dictated flying with two pilots in the cockpit, who might be called upon to perform at any time, I considered this phase of training essential for cockpit crews, and had created two pages of outlines that contained all the emergency procedures in the pilot manual, plus many unwritten emergencies of my own. Granted, it took extra time, but I believe that people liked this form of personal instruction, as it was not something that they had received in ground school. (Five plus thirty-five IP.) The next day, Densley and I again trained locally in Echo. (Two plus fifty-five IP.)

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<sup>15</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 396-397. Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 360-362. With aircraft made available by the ceasefire in South Vietnam F-4s, B-52s, A-7s, and F-111s participated in the effort to retake Paksong.



## **THE SAM NEUA WIRETAP MISSION**

As with the Vinh tap operation, a great deal of expense and time-consuming effort had been expended during research and planning for a projected Sam Neua phone tap mission. It was now time to execute this effort.

Although the overall concept was fairly new, and not perfected in our Theater, and we were the pathfinders, discounting Murphy-like variables, mission basics were straightforward. First, deliver human assets to install the taps; then place an ADR solar array on high ground, achieving a direct sight trajectory to receive signals that would be transmitted to an overhead plane, where it would then be recorded or relayed south to special equipment in AB-1's radio room. However, implementation of this task was another matter. Since the plan was conceived to take place in the enemy's backyard, specially tailored locations would have to be selected that would assure maximum secrecy from detection, and optimum signal opportunity.

Having failed to successfully execute the log mission in support of an agent near Sam Neua, we had no viable spies in the area, so any information essential to the mission would have to be garnered by reconnaissance planes. <sup>16</sup> Black and white photographs identifying likely sites for both the tap and ADR antenna would initially be provided by high flying USAF S-71 aircraft. Then, after photo interpreters (PI), using stereoscopic lenses, had devoted numerous hours in the laboratory examining strip pictures, Air America's photo

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<sup>16</sup> Spies: We had been absent from upper Military Region Two for years, and even if there were undoubtedly sympathetic people still living in the province, the Author was not privy to any knowledge of these individuals. Of course, I was not told everything. Moreover, a log mission to supply a spy the previous year had failed because of faulty LORAN signals. The proposed recipient of the log supplies had disappeared and was never heard from again.

reconnaissance aircraft, Volpar 42Z and crew, were dispatched to provide low-level high-resolution photographs of specifically selected areas along Route-65. <sup>17</sup>

Experienced PIs studied all the photographs and derived from them the most advantageous wiretap and ADR insertion locations. <sup>18</sup> During the early era of developing high technology, courtesy of the space program, photo resolution must have approached a very high state of the art. From these photographs, multiplex glass insulators were compared to Vinh insulators. Then, depending on any changes, exact replicas were designed and transceiver miniaturization units were installed inside the units.

All that remained for implementation of the Sam Neua wiretap phase one was a "safe" location to insert the installation team. The entire first phase of the mission was predicated on successful installation of the insulators. During our White House briefings with Buddy Rogers, and in the PI laboratory next door that included an examination of the landing

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<sup>17</sup> Volpar 42Z: Hazardous photo intelligence flights were conducted by a few senior Air America pilots over the years. Among these were experienced and senior Captains Berl King and Bob Main, supervised by Jim Rhyne.

EW Knight Emails, 07/11/01, 07/13/73, 12/26/00. The crew of Volpar 42Z conducted a perfect pass over the telephone line. Buddy called Wayne saying that 42Z obtained all the photo detail they needed for the mission. The glass insulator was the device that held the multiplex telephone lines in place on the poles. According to Knight, multiplex insulator taps designed from photos were fabricated at Langley. These devices had to pass close inspection, so a good copy was required. They were a perfect replica and miniaturization features were difficult to duplicate for the time.

<sup>18</sup> Although not located in the most remote area along Route-65, the wiretap location was selected for its perceived easy access by a trail and line of sight transmission two and a half miles south-southeast to the top of Phou Nia, the proposed site for the ADR installation. On the north side of the valley a large river intervened between the road and telephone line. Despite proximity of the small village of Kang Mang, a nighttime tap operation under the right conditions was deemed feasible.

zone, we learned that the team insertion point was planned at the lower northwest end of 3,776-foot Phou Louang, a relatively narrow six-mile-long, sheer ridgeline paralleling the north side of Route-65. Once on the ground, at all times maintaining cover and concealment, the eight-man team would proceed slowly southeast along the ridge and other terrain for about nine miles to the tap installation point. Scratch had previously worked with the well-paid team leader, and had utmost confidence in the man's intellect, ability to lead men, and achieve a successful mission. Upon reaching the tap point, under the cover of darkness, while six men provided a secure perimeter defense, two experienced members of the team would descend to the valley floor, ascend the pole, and substitute and install the look-alike insulators. <sup>19</sup> With this phase of the mission complete, the team would return to the original insertion point. As furtive movement was essential to avoid detection and paramount to success, phase one was calculated and programed to consume several days.

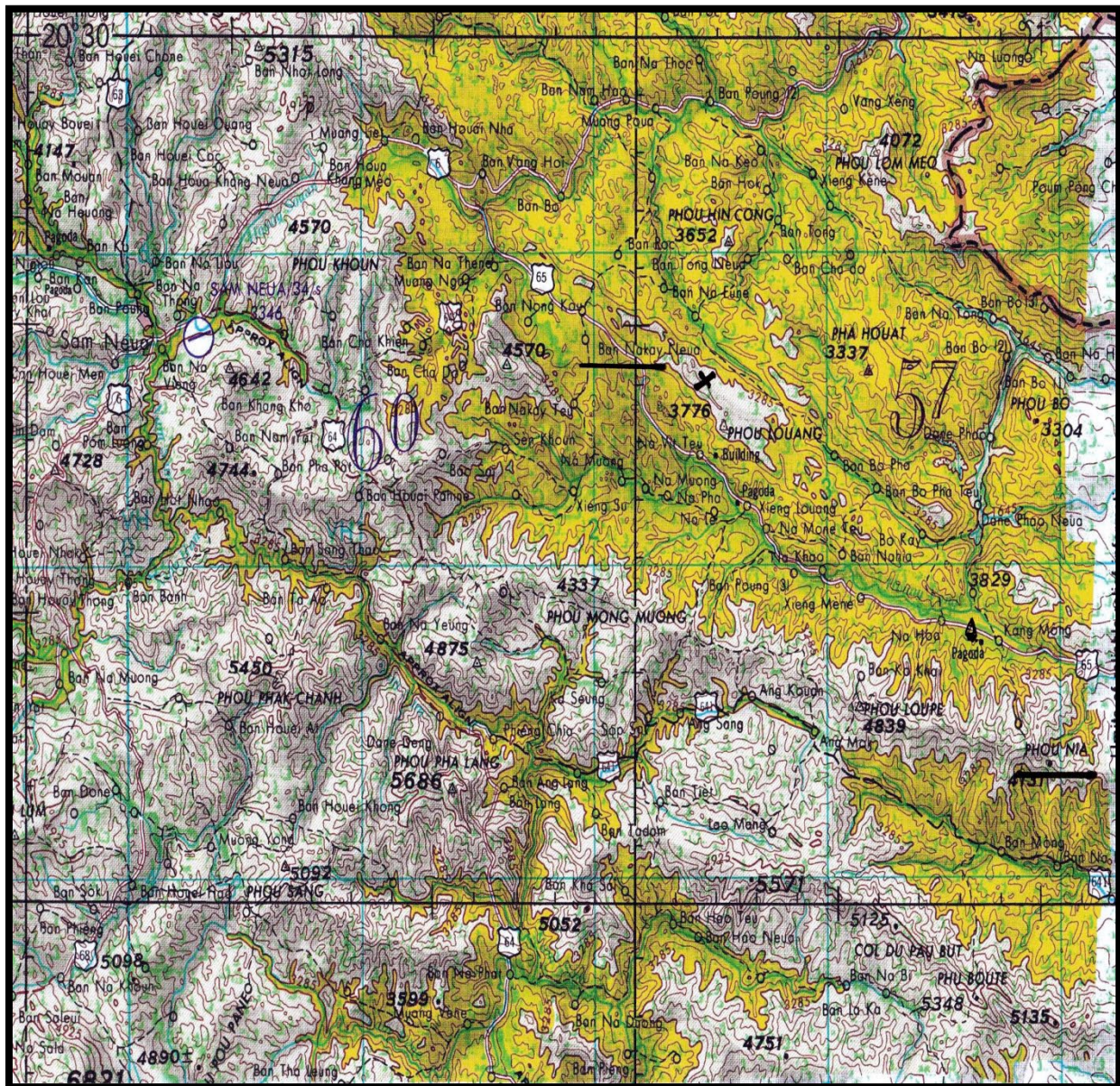
So began challenging and exciting months-long mission attempts. Operations were generally fraught with high stress levels, aborts, failures, and semi-success--but these factors constituted the nature of Special Project work, and no one ever said the efforts would be easy.

Tuesday the sixth, I checked into the operations counter after the noon hour to FCF XW-PHB with electronics technician specialist Tom Deeble. Our task was to ensure that LORAN and CDI equipment were mission ready and functioning properly. (Thirty minutes.) Next, I joined Scratch and Deak Kennedy in Papa Hotel Echo for a fifty-minute FCF that, in addition to normal

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<sup>19</sup> Notwithstanding the many telephone pole like installation training sessions conducted at PS-44, the men had supposedly learned valuable lessons from errors committed during the difficult and protracted Vinh mission.





1:25,000 map showing a portion of eastern Sam Neua (Houa Phan) Province in upper Military Region Two, and our specific area of the Route-65 phone tap mission. The commando team was inserted on the Phou Louang (X) ridge, generally across the valley from Pathet Lao headquarters in the Ban Nakay Neua caves (underlined). After infiltration, the team moved clandestinely southeast to the phone tap installation point (triangle). They performed their work, and retraced their path to Phou Louang. The ADR relay antenna (underlined) was programed to be installed on a previously selected tree on top of Phou Nia that provided line of sight to the tap.

Author Personal Map.

procedures, ensured LORAN, infrared flood light, and the auxiliary fuel tank transfer system operated normally. Of the two S-58Ts programed for the mission, Echo was the primary mission ship. Bravo, the secondary SAR aircraft, would be crewed by Captains Bill Hutchison and Al Cates, and Flight Mechanic Chuck Low.<sup>20</sup>

As the designated mission commander, Kanach had selected me as his second pilot for multiple reasons: He had been flying the Chinook most of the time, and, although a versatile and extraordinary pilot, he might not have felt totally competent and proficient in the Twinpac. In addition, to being currently proficient in the S-58T, I was current in the latest emergency procedures. From cockpit experiences the previous year, we had gained mutual respect for each other's ability to handle the machine in even the hairiest situations. Lastly, seniority and actual combat experience weighed heavily in the choice. We had seen and done nearly everything conceivable during the long war, and, severely tested on every count had managed to survive intact.

That afternoon we loaded Echo with essential survival gear, taxied to the Q warehouse, and shut down to await arrival of the eight-man insertion team.<sup>21</sup> One of the Customers had provided Scratch with IT&T prototype night vision goggles (NVG). While Deak obtained three box lunches from the USAF flight kitchen, we donned unmarked AB-1-issued brown U.S. Army Nomex flight suits over our already warm Nomex uniforms.<sup>22</sup> I also strapped a

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<sup>20</sup> Al Cates Log entry for 02/06/73.

<sup>21</sup> Jim Pearson FEPA log entry, 02/03/73. Flying 868 with Barney Heidt, Jim had delivered the men to the AB-1 complex on the third. The mission was originally scheduled for the fourth. However, adverse weather precluded launching on that date.

<sup>22</sup> Thick Nomex clothes (two layers of trousers) were worn to help diminish severe burns in case of fire after a crash.





Captain Julian "Scratch" Kanach reading a paper in the cabin section of an S-58T.

Author Collection.

holster containing a flat PPK 9mm handgun Wayne had offered me to replace the unwieldy, long barrel .22 caliber Ruger Blackhawk I had carried in Laos for years. The black James Bond type weapon had belonged to former helicopter chief pilot John Ford, and was left in the CPH office under lock and key when he transferred to Washington. After team trainer Shep Johnson accompanied and boarded the North Vietnamese Army-dressed troops on our aircraft, we cranked up and departed for the Long Tieng base via the "Damn Site."

At The Alternate, preparing for the insertion and return to Udorn, we topped off the auxiliary fuel tank, and proceeded to the north/south airstrip at Shing Scha (LS-339), generally located on the north-south mountain ranges a little north of the old Phu Cum (LS-50) site. At the time, Shing Scha was considered somewhat more secure than Bouam Long, where the enemy was still in the process of withdrawing from their unsuccessful two-month offensive to seize the site. In addition, Site-339 was closer to, and more aligned with, the flight track that was planned to our landing zone. Since the enemy radar van that had caused us trouble during the aborted log mission had been discovered and destroyed on Route-6, we had more confidence in the LORAN equipment. While we waited for the assigned Otter crew to assess last minute weather in the target location, I programed the LORAN set with pre-selected coordinates calculated to help us "thread the needle" to the landing zone between Sam Neua town and areas of known or suspected AAA emplacements.

Consistent with previous successful operations, the insertion was slated for twilight. Even though Kanach had a night vision device slung around his neck to use if necessary during a night departure, he preferred to employ as much residual daylight as possible during landing, for we were not



The completed hydroelectric dam located at the west end of Ritaville Ridge. Often plagued with Pathet Lao harassment, the impressive structure was built with the cooperation of several nations. Known by pilots, as the "Damn Site," in adverse or smoky conditions it was used as a navigational and radio checkpoint for aircraft flying north and south.

Author Collection.



particularly enthusiastic about goggle efficacy because of the limited green field of visual acuity, a distinct lack of depth perception, and tendency of the button batteries to fail at inappropriate times. After the Twin Otter crew buzzed us and radio contact was established, we learned that worsening weather conditions in the selected area presented a no-go situation that evening.

As we prepared to return to Udorn with the team, Scratch hovered and turned ninety degrees to the dirt runway for a westerly takeoff. Raising the collective slightly, Kanach eased toward the edge of the mountain, and then, while demanding maximum power, he rotated the nose forward, and departed. Almost immediately after we cleared the rim of the hill, the number two power section began stalling in spectacular fashion. Following each monstrous boom, huge sheets of flame shot out of the exhaust stacks, illuminating the gathering twilight. <sup>23</sup> During the blink of an eye, ten rapid, successive booms, and deafening noise reverberated throughout the area.

In heart rending fashion, it was abundantly clear that we were in deep kimshi--experiencing the gravest of all possible situations. Specifically, we were out of ground effect, had not yet achieved translational lift, and were without sufficient power to attain flying speed or able to climb. <sup>24</sup> Worse, with only one power section producing power, we were slowly

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<sup>23</sup> I had experienced a similar incident once before while in the Marine Corps when an R-1820 reciprocating engine swallowed an exhaust valve east of Udorn and flames shot out of the exhaust stacks.

<sup>24</sup> Out-of-Ground Effect (OGE): A condition while hovering more than half a rotor diameter above the ground or in airspace, no added lift is created by main rotor downwash that hovering in-ground-effect (IGE) over solid ground creates in a no-wind condition.

descending toward the mountain slope and certain disaster. <sup>25</sup>

Seconds counted, but like a stopped frame in movie film, time seemed frozen. Caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place, we were in a serious dilemma. Because of the proximity of the steep mountain slope, employing the correct procedure by reducing the collective to stop or minimize the stalling condition would only hasten the descent and an imminent, perhaps disastrous crash. On the other hand, if stalling continued, compressor blades would eventually fail, fly about like shrapnel, and the engine might catch fire.

My eyes were probably wide as saucers, as I contemplated an unsavory crash that would certainly result in us unceremoniously tumbling downhill to our deaths in a ball of twisted metal.

At the onset of the stalls, I had contemplated raising the auxiliary tank release cover, activating the release switch, and pickling the 900-pound fuel tank to drastically lighten the ship, enhance lift, and allow Scratch to implement emergency procedures. However, besides the short time afforded, there was a serious downside to this plan. The switch was positioned under, and close to, the pilot's control lever. Any rapid movement on my part might have jostled the pilot's collective, and exacerbated an already tenuous situation. Furthermore, never contemplating such an incident, we had never briefed each other as to what emergency actions we would take during such an occurrence.

While I considered our lack of options, stalling ceased. Either we had achieved proper lift, followed by flying speed, or

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<sup>25</sup> At a normal cruise speed, the Twinpac had the capability to fly on one power section. But at a hover or below translational lift (about thirteen knots), and with only one engine operating, there was no other option than to prepare for a "controlled" crash. The only upside to this scenario was that given a level area to land the crash would normally be survivable.

Scratch was finally able to decrease power demand. Regardless of whether it was a combination or a single item that contributed to the restoration of power to the number two power section, our bacon was saved. Seemingly a miracle, or merely dumb luck, the cessation of stalls had occurred in the nick of time, for we had come within inches of crashing onto the west slopes of Phu Cum.<sup>26</sup>

Once safely airborne and en route to the house, after calming down somewhat and thinking about the incident, I informed Scratch that, given future similar circumstances involving high power situations, I would monitor the drop switch. If anything like that happened again, and threatened us with a crash, I would not hesitate to immediately pickle the auxiliary tank. As always, it was difficult to know what Scratch was thinking, but despite his taciturn manner he appeared to agree with my plan. After that we conversed very little, focusing our thoughts on what might have been that night.

As usual, perhaps desiring to re-acquire his Twinpac touch, Scratch flew the entire mission. We flew direct to Udorn at altitude, and since there was no further requirement for radio silence, a hundred miles north of the airfield, I switched to one of the discrete Brigham Control ground control intercept unit (GCI) UHF frequencies, and requested a radar vector to the base. We were informed to squawk (send) a set of four discrete numbers. I dialed these into our identification friend or foe (IFF) transmitter, and depressed the send button. This activated a distinct display on the controller's radar screen. Positive identification precluded getting intercepted by friendly or unfriendly air, and allowed the radar controller to provide us

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<sup>26</sup> In retrospect, had I been PIC, I would have departed down strip in order to remain in ground effect and demand less power for takeoff. This would also have allowed for any potential problems that necessitated an aborted takeoff.

with vector "pigeons" to the base. <sup>27</sup> Then, within twenty miles of the base, we were assigned an approach control frequency, and within a few miles of the field were handed off to the tower/ground control operator. The number of USAF planes at the base had substantially diminished since the cessation of the war to the east, hence, there was little, if any, night traffic, so we had the airspace to ourselves.

After debarking the tap team at the Q warehouse, we taxied to the adjoining parking ramp about 2000 hours, wrote up the stalling situation in the logbook, talked to a maintenance lead man about the problem, and unloaded our gear into a B-bus. While the maintenance people towed Echo into the hangar for an engine teardown, we proceeded to the White House for debriefing. (Six hours, One plus thirty-five night.) Charged with transmitting mission results to Langley, Rogers and his AB-1 crew listened intently, but silently, to our hairy account of the incident. Expecting failures, Buddy said we would attempt the same mission on the seventh. Then, as customary after a mission, Buddy produced a cold six-pack of Washington State brewed Olympia beer from his well-stocked booze locker. Still keyed up with excitement and highly dehydrated from the extraordinary stress and heavy clothing, I greatly relished the extra curricula activity. Since Scratch preferred not to drink that night, I took the remaining canned brews hanging in the plastic retainer home with me to consume in the Company B-bus. <sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Radar vectors: Compass directions to fly. Called pigeons in the trade, as in "Papa Hotel Echo your pigeons to home plate are 180 degrees."

<sup>28</sup> As the alcohol penetrated my stomach and coursed straight to my brain, "Two Beer Casterlin" really should have been content with a hydrating glass of water.

EW Knight Email, Wayne is not sure if he monitored this mission from the AB-1 radio room. He did not fly for an inordinate time in early February which was unusual, but seems to recall an abort.



A Company B-bus. Chief Pilot Helicopters Captain Wayne Knight standing on the parking ramp next to a Volkswagen vehicle used to transport flight personnel to and from town, and around the Air America facility complex.

The children were asleep and Tuie was preparing for bed. Very funky, I showered and then joined her for a long slumber. I never discussed the Special Project or my nocturnal activities with her, and, as a sufficiently astute pilot's wife, she never asked questions.

Early the next afternoon, I FCF Papa Hotel Bravo, getting it ready for the secondary role of SAR by Hutch, Al, and Chuck. (Thirty-five minutes.) With Echo temporarily out of service, assigned XW-PHD, our crew again staged out of LS-339. This time we were supported by Captain Jim Pearson and Ted Mauldin flying Twin Otter N6868 as a relay platform. (Four plus thirty-six, two plus sixteen night, two landings.) <sup>29</sup>

Although we arrived quite close to the objective, once again adverse weather emerged in the target area, preventing an insertion. After loitering for a short period in anticipation of a change, weather conditions failed to improve, so we were obliged to abort. Scratch again flew the entire mission, which required some brief IMC flight through clouds on the way home.

We arrived at the Air America facility at 2245 hours. (Seven hours, three plus fifty-five night.) Nobody was particularly happy over the failure to complete the mission that night, but we did not control Lao weather, and without in-

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<sup>29</sup> Jim Pearson FEPA logbook, 02/07/73. Bill Leary Notes. Interview with Ted Mauldin. Ted transferred from Saigon on November 1970 and flew Porters out of Vientiane. You could bid the Twin Otter program, but not the Special Project. After consulting with the Customers, the Chief Pilots had to extend an invitation. An attempt was made to keep numbers low for security reasons. Ted was accepted into the Special Project in November 1971. Mauldin remained in the Special Project until Udorn closed in June 1974. Special Project missions required ten hours planning for each hour flown. Briefings included photo intelligence, enemy positions, and best routes to the drop zones. LORAN generally worked well, but was affected by sunspots and B-52 ECM. For air drops in the Bolovens Plateau area, they would carry two kickers to handle the palletized loads.

country weather stations, USAF forecasts were just that, and not particularly reliable in mountainous areas where fog and low clouds could instantly form.

The following night marked a repeat of the 7th for tap crews. Bad weather once again influenced the area causing an abort. (Seven plus forty-five, three ten night.) Capitulating to the three recent failures, and despite pressure from Washington to produce hard intelligence relating to the impending Lao ceasefire, Buddy elected to declare a down day in anticipation of a significant change in weather. During this period, taking advantage of the busy PI shop, we devoted major time to studying current black and white aerial photographs of the landing zone and ridgeline.

During these interludes, I examined interesting items in the shop. I knew that there were continuing attempts to develop disguised air-delivered listening devices to drop on the Trails, and was impressed with one sensor cleverly concealed in a bush.

One slender photo interpreter was wearing a silver bracelet, something like identification jewelry that was in vogue when I was in high school. I thought this strange for an adult male, so I looked closer and inquired about it. I discovered that stamped on the bracelet was the name of a prisoner of war (POW), a Naval aviator named Robert Harper Shumaker, who had been incarcerated in the "Hanoi Hilton" since early 1965. Evidently, wearing POW jewelry was in fashion with some patriotic people in the States. It was something I was totally unaware of in my provincial world.

Perhaps the guys were lonely and we were invited to visit the photo shop at any time to examine landing zones or to just chat. However, this was generally frowned on by Wayne Knight, who for some unspecified reason did not want us to become too chummy with White House or Agency people. He reiterated this

when I told him that Buddy had given me the combination to the push button lock on the front door.

### **SAM-7**

*"The enemy has weapons over here now that they aim and fire and the missile homes in on you. You are indeed fortunate if you see it in time and can evade it. We are unable to cope with things like this. We just lost a C-123. We are not sure what got it but suspect one of these nasties."*

Letter Home, 02/16/73.

Beginning on 24 July 1965, when the first American jet, a USAF F-4C, was downed by a Soviet surface-to-air (SAM-2) missile in North Vietnam, the deadly devices increased our hazard and stress levels, and became a fact of life in our work areas. For some time, we had known about and discussed attributes of hand-held SA-7s that were perceived as a threat in some areas of southern Laos, mostly along border areas encompassing the logistical Trail systems. Thus far, there had never been a sighting close to the Mekong River.

The SA-7, an approximately five-foot thirty-two-pound NATO-designated Grail missile was first employed in the Middle East during 1969. It was entirely passive because of infrared guidance, and pilots had no way of knowing they were being tracked. After half cocking the trigger mechanism, the Grail operator tracked his prey through an optical sight on the shoulder-mounted launcher. A red light changing to green alerted the gunner that the missile's electronics had acquired the infrared heat signature of the aircraft. Then the operator fully activated the trigger mechanism. After launch, the two-stage motor boosted the missile to 750 miles per hour. Early missile



versions had an effective range of nearly one kilometer.<sup>30</sup> The North Vietnamese weapons inventory contained the Soviet manufactured Grail, but it did not appear in South Vietnam until the 1972 cross border Easter Offensive, when it achieved its first kill.

Slower flying helicopters were more vulnerable to the Strella than faster jets. During the 1972 conflict, the missile had a thirty-three percent accuracy rate until pilots learned that a cork-screw smoke trail divulged a launch in progress, and took evasive actions to break the electronic lock.<sup>31</sup>

It was inevitable that the enemy would deploy Strella missiles in Laos, but initially there was little proof of presence or major concern in Military Region Two. However, there were active rumors regarding hand-held missiles being present in lower portions of the country. During this time frame, three incidents citing unsubstantiated missile launches were reported in Military Region Two by large cargo planes of either Air America or CASI. One was reported in Sam Neua Province and the other two east of the Plain of Jars. All three cases were similar, with crews reporting midair explosions close to the aircraft.<sup>32</sup>

Thakhet, Savannakhet, and Pakse were a different matter. Encompassing our work area, they were all close to the lower end of the Ho Chi Minh Trail system. In these areas there were

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<sup>30</sup> SA-7-synonymous with Grail-Strella: We called this surface to air missile a Strella. It was roughly the equivalent of the U.S. Army Redeye missile.

<sup>31</sup> John Nichols and Barret Tillman *On Yankee Station: The Naval Air War over Vietnam* (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute, 1987). Edgar Doleman, *The Vietnam Experience: Tools of War* (Boston, Boston Publishing, 1984).

<sup>32</sup> Beside large caliber AAA fire, there was suspected enemy capability to launch proximity-exploding shells at aircraft, consisting of fused rifle-propelled grenades (RPG) and mortar rounds creating airbursts close to aircraft.

sympathizers who were caught between a rock and a hard place, and who did not know how the conflict would be resolved. Therefore, they vacillated between both sides. One USAID Customer had a number of good friends stationed in Savannakhet who related that the enemy had infiltrated within a few kilometers of the town and airport.

*Although "use of hand-held missiles was never 100 percent substantiated [in the country], evidence was so strong that they were all warned to be alert to the possibility, which if it occurred on a major scale, would have pretty much put us out of business.*

*Virtually everything we collectively [performed] in the north involved the use of aircraft. There was no Customer anywhere in Laos who wanted to see American pilots or their crews killed. Customers had their job to do, flight crews had their jobs to do and we all took chances. Any time you do that, eventually someone is going to get hurt. Due to circumstances, flight crews probably lost more, but we all lost several [people]." <sup>33</sup>*

The stark reality of the existence of hand-held missiles came to the forefront on February ninth, when 56-4374 a Fairchild C-123K, was shot down seven miles east-southeast of Thakhet's Lima-40A, the forward launch site of our Vinh tap mission. The crew of Captain Howard Boyles, First Officer Jack W Cavill, AFS Prasit Chai Chana, and Sourith was conducting a daily morning milk run, hauling 12,000 pounds of household items from Vientiane to Savannakhet. At 0732 hours, about forty-five minutes after departure, two explosions occurred in the vicinity of the left engine. A large fire ensued. PIC Boyles ordered the Air Freight Specialists' (AFS or Kickers) to jettison cargo. As

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<sup>33</sup> Blaine Jensen, former USAID Customer letter.

fire swept along the fuselage, Boyles told the AFDs to bail out. (AFS) Sourith, who was believed closest to the open door, jumped. On the way to the ground, he observed the plane go out of control. Next, the left wing separated. The plane began to spin, and exploded prior to contacting the ground. Although badly burned, Sourith was the only C-123 crewmember known to survive the crash. <sup>34</sup>

Suspecting a missile strike, but initially unable to pinpoint the exact cause of the crash, the incident was a hot topic of conversation among our crewmember group for some time. Coming on the heels of a traumatic FEPA contract confrontation with the Company, in which pilot hostility pay and total compensation was to be drastically slashed, the loss of life seemed anticlimactic. It emphasized the extreme hazards all crewmembers were daily subjected to, regardless of any reputed ceasefire or cessation of hostilities.

One day I was in FIC viewing the situation wall map for northern Military Region Two in connection with our Sam Neua mission, when Captain Don Henthorn, like a bull, charged excitedly into the room, waving two sheets of yellow legal paper. According to Don they contained a documented account he had written claiming he had been fired at by a SA-7 missile. He had just delivered a recovery team to the Thakhet C-123 crash site to scour the area for human remains and was climbing to altitude when he observed a white corkscrew trail of smoke rising from the ground. Soon the object soared near or between his rotor blades. There was no explosion--with any contact the five-and-a-half-pound warhead would certainly have downed the H-34--but the temporary displacement of air and resulting

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<sup>34</sup> Professor William Leary February 1973 Notes. Joe Leeker, ed, C-123B 564374. Accident/Incident Report, C-123K, 56-4374, CIA Corporate Files, Box 62, University of Texas Dallas.

concussion when the air rushed back into the void, nearly turned Henthorn's H-34 upside down. Now, we all were aware that the "Crazy Indian," a certified colorful character, was often subject to gross exaggeration, but Henthorn was also a courageous and experienced sort of individual, who had participated in many SARs for downed USAF pilots, and had survived other hairy experiences. <sup>35</sup>

His account chilled me to the bone, and during a pre-mission briefing, I mentioned and asked Buddy Rogers for information regarding the incident and evidence of Stella missiles purportedly close to the river. Buddy allowed that he knew of no hard intelligence regarding missiles in that area and poo-pooed Henthorn's sighting as entirely imaginary.

This was a shocking revelation. Rogers' answer upset me considerably. What reason would a seasoned helicopter line Captain like Henthorn have to lie? Previously, I had implicitly trusted AB-1 briefing content for validity and reliability. Now seeds of doubt began to germinate in my mind regarding the veracity of their information. My continued survival, and that of my crew depended on accurate details about a situation and sound judgement. Much of this stemmed from good, solid

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<sup>35</sup> Homecoming 2 Project, 03/15/91. Biography Boyles, Howard R. "Two months later, on April 1, ashes were recovered from the scene which were later (November 12) positively identified as being those of Cavil and Boyles..."

intelligence derived from these Agency people. <sup>36</sup>

As I continued to reflect on the purported missile incident in the Thakhet area, my suspicions of nefarious complicity between the two entities I worked for mounted to confuse the issue. I theorized that Air America and Agency leaders did not want us to be aware of any significant Strella threat, so we would continue to perform their work in Laos. Air America was going to reduce hostility pay soon. This fact, and the recent incident might stimulate a pilot exodus of such mass proportions that it might shut down a major portion of the Lao supply

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<sup>36</sup> Backroom activities: Implicit in flying a machine with so many moving parts that could fail at any moment, it was in the helicopter pilot's nature to be slightly paranoid. With me this feeling sometimes extended to suspect Agency agendas. I assumed things were discussed in the White House backroom that we line pilots were not privy to, just specifics in passing. Of course, during the previous year I had been a newbie in the Special Project and not deeply involved in planning stages. For example, even though I was a prime participant, I never knew the exact location or complete details of the Vinh operation until reading Ken Conboy's *Shadow War*.

EW Knight Email. Wayne generally knew the object of our efforts. If there were any backroom dealings, and he assumed there were some, he was never privy to them. His primary allegiance was to us, and he would have had strong objections to things being withheld, or criticism incorrectly presented. Wayne always considered that Rogers was very open with him, and doesn't believe he had any secret agendas.

operation.<sup>37</sup>

I still respected, liked, and admired Buddy Rogers. Moreover, I whole-heartedly believed in the importance of intelligence gathering work we were performing for the Agency (AKA USG). There were many inferences and negative conclusions that one could draw from what I had recently heard, but for the time being, I kept them to myself. I decided to take a pessimistic bent, question everything, and always plan an out. I also recalled Charlie Jones' wise admonition to me while I was showing him the ropes in 1965, and was bitterly complaining about the frequent SAR requirements. *"Dick, remember, one hand is for you and one is for the Customer, and if need be, both hands are for you."*

Concern and discussion over the incident, and the likely presence of Strellas in our work areas ensued, and continued among our pilot group. Word filtered down to us that first

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<sup>37</sup> EW Knight Emails, 12/23/00, 12/26/00. Wayne states that he was probably away from the office at the time of the Grail incident, Wayne was not aware of my conversations with Rogers (he does recall my concern about the Stella). During the critical Sam Neua operation, we needed all the special trust and confidence in our leaders and valid intelligence at this time. He *"doesn't recall debriefing Henthorn, but if it came to a case of accepting either Buddy's or Don's version of events, he would have to go with Buddy."* In defense, Wayne thinks that when Buddy said there were no Grails in the Thakhet area, he was relaying what his intelligence sources were telling him. The two men had become quite close and Wayne does not think Rogers would have misled him.

In retrospect, I wish that I had talked to Knight, as he was confident of Buddy's veracity. As usual, Scratch Kanach was placid and noncommittal in relation to these events. One rarely knew what Scratch was thinking.

Author Note-vindication achieved: Months after the incident, I was enjoying a cold beer in the air-conditioned Club Rendezvous Animal Bar some of us frequented on hot days when a Customer from the AB-1 photo intelligence laboratory, who I knew casually, offered information that a SA-7 missile launcher tube had recently been discovered in one of the numerous caves in the needle-sharp hills lying north northwest of Thakhet. After all the previous denials of missiles in that area, I was not particularly surprised.

generation SA-7 missiles were not too accurate. We were also advised that after months on the Trails, absorbing all the negative effects of heat and humidity, batteries used to activate and launch the missiles were considered very weak and virtually worthless. In addition, the Strellas could be fooled by pilots. Turning into them and diving would often break the electronic infra-ray (IR) lock. Seemingly a foolhardy technique for our slow-moving ships, and generally intended for faster jet aircraft, this questionable tactic largely depended on observing the missile's smoke trail, and having sufficient time to react.

In order to partially assuage our group, each helicopter was provided with flare kits to employ in establishing a heat signature some distance away from the helicopter in the hope of diverting a missile. It was kind of a joke, for this necessitated prior awareness of a SA-2 launch and instant reaction by the Flight Mechanic. It was also disconcerting to learn that all the Department of Defense Army Attaché (DOD ARMA) Hueys had been repainted with a dark stippled paint to reduce the IR signature. A pipe extension had been installed to the aft portion of the engine that ducted hot exhaust gasses upward to be dispersed by forward flight or rotor wash. Nothing similar had been retrofitted to our contract or Special Project

aircraft. <sup>38</sup>

## **PREPARING FOR A POST LAO CEASEFIRE**

Many Vientiane U.S. Embassy staff believed that after the ceasefire was signed and implemented, and once a bilateral provisional government was established, the majority of North Vietnamese combat troops would return to the North. Some would remain in Laos to ensure their Pathet Lao surrogates would follow Hanoi leaders' orders. For the RLG, it was important to maintain some semblance of a balance of forces, and this largely depended on funding, which was poised to be reduced by a third.

In order to make this strategy work, maintaining a military force of 46,000 was envisioned. Thai irregulars would be returned to Thailand, and tribal irregulars disbanded and/or integrated into the regular army.

Originally proposed by the Department of Defense (DOD) and rejected many years previously, the embassy now intended to restructure, consolidate, and reduce its many parts by fifty percent. Attaché components (ARMA, AIRA) would be reduced and replaced by a defense attaché office. Surplus personnel would be transferred to the JUSMAGTHAI deputy chief, who would report

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<sup>38</sup> EW Knight Emails, 12/26/00, 12/27/00 Wayne asserts, "Flare pistols and containers were obtained for all Air America aircraft working in Laos. We got the exhaust modifications for the Bells, but maybe only [for] the 205s. They were probably were not allowed on the N registered 204B's. He thinks Air America was offered or received a supply of the IR paint."

"Not long after the Thakhet shoot down, someone at AB-1, maybe Tom Lum, informed Wayne they had [acquired] an SA-7 missile launcher. [After seeing it] Wayne asked if the pilots could examine it and conduct a familiarization session. He received approval and Roy Lewis brought it to an [all-pilots-meeting] (APM) in the Club movie theater. During the briefing, everyone got to hold the device and become familiar with how long it took for a lock-on and the sound of the growler."



directly to the defense attaché. The supply medium, Requirements Office (RO), would be assigned to the JUSMAGTHAI deputy chief.

Other reductions would be made in the Agency for International Development (USAID) and the United States Information Services (USIS). Air America and Continental Air Services would be phased out, but in stages, and to be completed sixty days after formation of a provisional government.<sup>39</sup>

## WASHINGTON

A Special Actions Group Meeting was convened in Washington on 6 February to discuss Vietnam planning. It was attended by fifteen members, including the State Department, Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, CIA, the National Security Council, and Chairman Henry Kissinger. At one-point Kissinger, who was about to commence a trip to Southeast Asia, asked William Sullivan about the Lao negotiations and learned that the Pathet Lao had agreed to an immediate ceasefire.

Ambassador Godley desired to defer the ceasefire issue a while longer because Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma wanted to enhance the ICC role in Laos or obtain better members.<sup>40</sup> He was also hopeful that the Vietnamese Army would withdraw behind the imaginary 1962 ceasefire line. He believed the RLA could improve the government's position by continuing the fighting, but it was noted that they were continuing to lose territory. At the time,

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<sup>39</sup> Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 363-364. Information from two messages from the embassy to the Secretary of State, 02/06/73, Immediate Problems Relating to the Ceasefire in Laos; 02/24/73, Mission Planning in Problems Relating to the Ceasefire in Laos.

<sup>40</sup> The International Control Commission formed after the 1962 Geneva Accords and containing western, communist, and "neutral" representatives failed miserably to monitor or achieve any lasting peace.

Souvanna was consulting with the King at Luang Prabang, and a decision was expected when he returned to Vientiane.

With the Bolovens Plateau on the brink of disaster for the Lao government, Kissinger was not keen about losing any more territory and instructed Sullivan to apprise Godley of this.

Kissinger learned that the North Vietnamese had sent three army regiments into Laos. (Two of the three independent regiments were identified as the 308th and the 88<sup>th</sup>.) The enemy had also moved an anti-aircraft unit from the southern panhandle into the Ho Chi Minh Trail area. Reports indicated that the largest logistical push in north Laos since 1968 was underway. It was not deemed a violation, but tended to show a lack of good will, and no intention to adhere to the Paris agreements.

A CIA representative from Langley headquarters reported on the excellent work USAF F-111 pilots had conducted at Bouam Long against enemy who were laying siege to the garrison. <sup>41</sup>

## **GODLEY**

*On the seventh Ambassador Godley forwarded a message to Henry Kissinger in Washington relating to the NSA's assistant to the President's impending visit to Vientiane and Hanoi:*

*"Saw Souvanna 1100 today. Told him of your plans...*

*I then raised the question of unconditional immediate ceasefire and he said what worried him was whether the North Vietnamese would stop fighting, which was what he planned to ask you to obtain for him in Hanoi. I told him I thought that had already been obtained by you in Paris with the North Vietnamese promise to withdraw plus the fact that since the North Vietnamese do not admit they have troops in Laos a [PL] agreement to an immediate ceasefire is all that is required...I*

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<sup>41</sup> FRUS, #9, 02/06/73, Minutes of Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, Vietnam Planning.

elaborated on the military situation, pointing out that in practically every area of Laos the enemy was either advancing or was poised to destroy friendly forces. I told Souvanna that he had to risk the North Vietnamese not continuing to fight, for his only other alternative was losing additional territory.

Souvanna accepted this and said he would contact Phoumi Vongvichit first thing in the morning and try to arrange for a ceasefire that would occur February 11 or 12..

I then asked him what were the points that he rejected in Phoumi's piece of paper that they discussed yesterday morning. Souvanna said there were four points, the first being the role of the communist neutralists in future governments. Souvanna said that he would not recognize the communist neutralists and that they either had to be considered real neutralists or [PL]. The second point was the withdrawal of Thai and American forces. Specific references to Thai and Americans was unacceptable to Souvanna in that there was no mention of [NVA] forces. He therefore proposed the withdrawal of all 'foreign' forces. The third point was a reference in the Pathet Lao draft to cessation of American bombing. The Prime Minister proposed cessation of all bombing. The final point was the overflight of [enemy] territory, which was prohibited in the Pathet Lao draft but which Souvanna said was essential in order that the RLG could resupply its civilian and/or military enclaves in [PL] territory. Souvanna also said that whereas previous drafts had mentioned the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Laos in 90 days he told Phoumi he thought this period should be reduced to 60 days.

I reiterated the necessity for an early ceasefire and he said I could assure you that he would do this to his utmost in this domain..

*...concern over reports from [Vientiane] that the RLG negotiators are spurning the [Pathet Lao] offer of an immediate unconditional ceasefire. To the best of my knowledge, the [PL] have continued to link military considerations to a political framework to be implemented after a ceasefire..."* <sup>42</sup>

Kissinger, Haig, Sullivan, et. al. arrived in Vientiane on the ninth with a strict agenda: to push for an immediate ceasefire. Despite being informed that the North Vietnamese had introduced a fresh division into south Laos, thus violating the Paris agreement, he did not waver. He informed Souvanna that U.S. military support was ending; unless the RLG understood this and accepted the proffered settlement, they could lose everything for which they had fought so hard.

Within a day, the American entourage pushed on to Hanoi. Once there, Kissinger discovered that the North Vietnamese leaders had no intention of withdrawing troops from Laos and Cambodia, as he had previously understood. This would occur only after a new government was installed in Laos. Without U.S. military leverage backing him up, he was unable to strike a favorable deal for Laos. The North Vietnamese did agree that Laos should revert to Geneva Accords neutrality, but even though we adhered to these protocols, as in 1962, it was preordained that the deceitful communists would fail to honor this portion of the Accords. <sup>43</sup>

After reading about a destructive fire at the Ski Times Square construction site in the *Steamboat Springs Pilot* newspaper, I wrote a letter to Don Valentine, the owner of

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<sup>42</sup> FRUS: Backchannel Message from the Ambassador to Laos (Godley) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), #10, Vientiane, 02/07/73. In a previous message, Kissinger had relayed to Godley details of his forthcoming trip to Southeast Asia. Kissinger urged the ambassador to encourage the Lao Government to negotiate a ceasefire agreement.

<sup>43</sup> Arthur Dommen.

Sunray Land Corporation, of which I was a substantial owner.<sup>44</sup> Most of the letter contained business items:

*"There are a lot of things in the mill over here now. We have projected leave plans for the middle of June through August. Will try and keep you informed about this.*

*I have been offered many jobs here, but am getting a bit tired of it all and would like to start a new life soon."*

Letter to Don Valentine in Steamboat Springs, Colorado.

## **INFIL**

Saturday the 10th, the same phone tap helicopter crews checked in at 1145 to brief at the Agency White House office for current details regarding weather, vehicular traffic on Routes-6 and 65 into and out of Sam Neua town, and status of Vietnamese air traffic activity.<sup>45</sup> The only difference was the time of landing, which Buddy now wanted to occur at dark.<sup>46</sup> Then we walked next door to the PI laboratory to view the latest landing zone photos.

In the afternoon, after checking Papa Hotel Alpha for correctly functioning systems, we taxied the short distance to the Q warehouse to collect the eight-man tap team and box lunches. We had to wait while the mini-gun was mounted in the cabin section of Papa Hotel Echo, the back-up aircraft.

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<sup>44</sup> I held a little more than twenty-two percent of the stock in the Sunray Corporation. Don and his mother owned the rest.

<sup>45</sup> Even though closely involved in the missions, Flight Mechanics were rarely included in these AB-1 briefings. Later, during the numerous ADR work, there was some interaction between Buddy Rogers and my cabin crew.

<sup>46</sup> From the flatlands of the Vientiane flood plain to northeastern Thailand, February sunset occurred at 1804 hours; complete dark was at 1825. In contrast, in the mountainous regions of northern Laos, the western setting sun sank below the hills earlier. Unless there was a cloud cover present, total dark occurred at least half an hour earlier than published sunset.

Arriving at The Alternate, we topped off and headed for LS-339, where we shut down to await Jimmy Pearson and Barney Heidt's (in Twin Otter 868) assessment of the weather and other conditions in the target area. (Eight plus forty-seven, one plus twenty-six night.)<sup>47</sup> When this was determined positive and relayed to us, we launched.

Depending on a circuitous route to avoid population centers and potential hot spots, a one-way flight to the target site was almost seventy-five miles, and would consume about fifty minutes. Following the LORAN readout translated to the course direction indicator (CDI) on the instrument panel, and identifying known points on the ground, we headed east for thirty-five miles, passing Route-6, invisible in the undergrowth. Then, at a waypoint, well clear of the road, we turned north-northeast to assume a track that generally paralleled the road into Sam Neua town, but was far enough east as not to be detected from a main artery. This did not include east-west trails and roads, but we had little choice in this except to fly at sufficient altitude to avoid small arms fire from the ground and hills. The 6,821-foot Phou Phan range towered to the left of our track and helped provide a positive fix. There were only two paths into the insertion point, a northern and southern route, and neither was particularly appealing. Taking the southern path, we would have to cross Route-65 at a point east of the Pathet Lao headquarters at Ban Nakay Neua, but this was unavoidable and passage would only be momentary.

We reached the north side of the extensive Phou Louang ridge, and Scratch banked left toward the western portion of the projected landing zone. As there was little light remaining,

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<sup>47</sup> Jim Pearson FEPA Logbook, 02/10/73.

Scratch donned his NVG. At this time, we had few of these night vision devices. One was reserved for the pilot in command, another set for the PIC of the backup ship, and another for the Twin Otter pilot. The left seat pilot of the primary ship was obliged to monitor instruments on the red dimly lighted console panel and advise the person flying of power available and progress inside the cockpit. This allowed the PIC to devote all his attention to the landing process and situation outside the aircraft.

It was pitch black. Without the benefit of a night vision device, I could hardly see a thing outside the cockpit. On short-short final Scratch switched on the two infrared hover lights mounted on the main landing gear struts that emitted a soft, ruby glow as seen from outside the ship. The NVG allowed Kanach to view the immediate landing area, and any large obstacles in the form of stumps, rocks, and the sort revealed under the high grass that now lay flat from the rotor downwash. Of course, until safely on the ground, there was a moment of suspense, for an enemy trooper positioned directly in front of the helicopter could observe the subdued rose-colored light. However, anyone in the immediate area could also hear the Twinpac's whirling main rotor and tail rotor blades, and engine whine. A landing in the wrong area was a crap shoot.

Following a successful landing, team debarkation, and departure we headed for home. Arrival time was at 2105. (Seven plus five, two plus fifteen night, one landing.)

During the Agency debriefing in Buddy's office, we learned that to avoid compromising the mission, the team leader would not be contacted for the period envisioned to complete the job. All present in the office seemed pleased that the first phase of the tap mission had been a success, without incident, and

finally underway. Rogers sent his post mission report to Langley indicating such.

The next day, at twilight, we mounted Papa Hotel Alpha and departed for PS-44 to train, remain proficient, and prepare for the next phase of the mission: team recovery, and the ADR insertion (Hutchison, Cates, and Low followed in Papa Hotel Echo). Even though I conducted en route LORAN navigation, I was assigned to log a deadhead flight. It did not make much sense, but it was a new day for us pilots, and deadheading might have saved the Customer a few pennies for the ferry time. (Two plus fifty, two plus fifty night.) <sup>48</sup>

The next day, flying Chinook 816016, Wayne Knight and Beng Bengston joined us at PS-44. It was Knight's first flight since late January. Several items contributed to this. He had been away for Christmas, busy scheduling crews, involved with the Special Project, participating in briefings, photo interpretation, flight following, and all the numerous and necessary items a mission required. <sup>49</sup>

Part of the equipment the Agency envisioned to use for Chinook Special Project missions was a long rope ladder, previously manufactured for the Vinh mission. Afterward, it was stored for future use during field training or actual missions. Tailored for infiltrating and exfiltrating troops from a hover in remote places considered too confined or rough for a helicopter to land, the device was bulky, quite heavy, and fitted with wood spacers to provide foot holds. (Three plus

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<sup>48</sup> These trips served more than one purpose. In addition to remaining night proficient and maintaining crew coordination, we were also in place and available as a back-up SAR for Twin Otter night missions in the Pakse area.

<sup>49</sup> EW Knight Email including Flight Time Records, 12/22/00.





S-58T Twinpac XW-PHD parked at the PS-44 Special Project training base. I also called this site "The Beach" for the grains of pure white sandstone particles seen in the foreground.

Author Collection. <sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Courtesy of Al Cates, this enlarged photograph of Hotel Delta adorns the wall above and in back of my computer desk.

forty, one plus five night.)<sup>51</sup> Self-directed crew coordination, LORAN navigation, rough area landings, and NVG proficiency training was planned. Against all eventualities, during both day and night flights, we briefly practiced deploying the rope ladder from an out of ground effect hover that required additional power. We also staggered night flights so as not to clutter air space and interfere with Chinook training sessions. (Four plus fifty-five, two plus forty night.)

Chinook Special Project training continued on Tuesday. During the day, a Bell UH-1M was recovered. The crew flew the ship back to Udorn that night. (Five plus fifty, one plus fifteen night.) We took lunch at the Pakse hostel. After picking up Al Cates, we continued training. A wooden mock-up ADR had been provided for practice insertion into the canopy of a small tree conveniently present in the local area. This activity necessitated performing a steady hover over the tree, while the Flight Mechanic deployed the ADR. This was not too difficult during the day, but the degree of difficulty was magnified many times at night using the NVGs. It required maximum concentration and a good deal of proficiency that only repeated training sessions would foster.

Since the phone tap team had not reported their latest disposition, after providing cover to Jim Pearson and Barney Heidt (868), who were air dropping to a road watch team on the move (five plus fifty-five, three plus sixteen, six landings, one abort), we RTB Udorn just before midnight to await further

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<sup>51</sup> EW Knight Emails, 12/23//00, 12/26/00. Bengston never advanced beyond First Officer status, so he did not fly very much in the Chinook program.

Rope Ladder: *"We may have tried them but could not stabilize them with our tremendous rotor wash. We settled on using the rescue hoist in the cargo mode, using a device known as the Chicago Grip for the troops to clip onto the cable and be lifted or lowered through the cabin floor."*

word and latest developments from the commando team. (Five plus twenty-four, three plus forty, ten landings.)

### **JARINA'S ACTIVITY**

Bell crews were still busy in Military Region Two. Mike Jarina, Stan Thompson, and a recent addition from Saigon, Flight Mechanic Gary Newfield, departed Udorn in 12F for Vientiane, and then The Alternate. As the four-battalion Thai Task Force operation to retake Moung Soui had not approached success, a special mission was mounted for Chinook and Bell crews to move the remainder of the northern battalions from the Site-57 area south, to link with battalions in place there. With one battalion withdrawn to form a defense southeast of Phou Pha Sai, Alpha stalled. The operation failed to achieve its goal, so by March the battalions were ordered back to the Long Tieng area.<sup>52</sup> Jarina also worked at Phu Cum (LS-50), and the crew RON at Vientiane. (Eight plus fifteen.)

After Lourdes replaced Neufield, the crew returned to The Alternate on the twelfth, to work the Ban Na area supporting the Task Force Alpha movement. Missions also included supply of local pads around Long Tieng, and RON was again at Vientiane. (Eight plus forty.) The following day the crew worked at Sala Phou Khoun (LS-260), LS-20A, and then returned to Wattay Airport and Vientiane for the night.

Ray Ferrante (DOH 12/29/72) replaced Thompson in Jarina's crew. Mike had previously flown with Ferrante on his initial upcountry flight, when weather conditions were smoky and hazy. They initially worked at Ban Padong and surrounding sites. After supplying all the sites, Mike asked Ray if he wanted to return

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<sup>52</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 391.

them to The Alternate. Ray looked at his Captain quizzically and asked, "Where are we?"

Later they were flying low, underneath a cloud cover on a branch of the (Nam) Khan River north of LS-32, when they began encountering pockets of small arms fire from wandering enemy patrols. Spotting the Four Rivers checkpoint, Mike knew exactly where he was and Phou Cum's location, so he felt confident climbing through the overcast. It was academic, but what he did not know was that clouds towered to 80,000 feet. Still on instruments (IFR), but at an appropriate altitude deemed to clear all obstacles, he turned south. During the ascent he had plotted a chart in his head and calculated how many minutes he had to fly in a no wind condition to clear the Plain of Jars. Breaking out of the clouds around Xieng Dat, Mike descended. While they were cruising, Mike again asked Ray if he wanted to fly. Ray looked across the cockpit at Mike, and again said no. Further south on the flood plain, they encountered clouds and fog on the Nam Ngum. Even for Mike it was demanding flying.

Eventually arriving at Udorn Mike told Ray that he had experienced some good instrument time that day.

*"That's the first time. I've never been on instruments in my life."* Ferrante was a former Army pilot, and had received instrument training, but had never experienced actual instrument flying.

On the fourteenth, Ferrante was back flying with Jarina. With weather somewhat better, they conducted refugee and recruiting work from Sam Tong to Ban Nam Song (LS-363, fifteen miles west). They also worked ten miles north of Site-363 at Tham Sorm (LS-74) in the Long Pot complex. Following a full day, they RON at Long Tieng. (Nine plus fifty-five.)

The next day Mike was relieved and caught a twenty-seven-minute ride to Udorn on C-130 218.

### **SMITH CHECKS OUT**

We continued losing pilots, not only to combat, but to normal circumstances. On the 14<sup>th</sup>, fixed wing Captain WP Smith was admitted to the Vientiane Embassy clinic with chest pains that he had first experienced the previous evening. Shortly afterward Smith suffered a massive myocardial infarction with attendant ventricular fibrillation. This was arrested, and he was evacuated south to the Udorn Air Force hospital via PC-6C N366F. His prognosis was guarded, but the attending physician reported that Smith's vital signs were good. Despite this prognosis, Smith died. The tall, slim, dark-haired man stemmed from a family with a history of early heart attacks. Bearing this in mind, he had lived a very pristine and guarded life, and exercised frequently, attempting to stave off the inevitable. With an inherited gene time bomb contained in his body, all his effort came to naught. <sup>53</sup>

### **RETRIEVAL**

While the Sam Neua tap team was still in the bush and unaccounted for, perhaps by design to prevent discovery, in anticipation of momentary launch, we continued to standby at the field or at home. We also maintained the machines in airworthy condition, ready to fly. On the 14<sup>th</sup>, I arrived at the airfield early, ready for action. As the team was believed still on the move, we spent the morning in the subdued lighting of the "Skunk Works" laboratory, briefing and studying aerial photos, using the awesome stereo-optic devices to display landing zones and

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<sup>53</sup> Gene Hughey, Assistant Chief Pilot fixed wing Laos, Air America XOXO, 02/14/73.

gun sites in detail. <sup>54</sup> The PI guys seemed happy to have us in the building and were competent and very helpful in developing our expertise in interpreting the photos. At first it was a difficult task, but we eventually mastered the technique. Starting early the next day, I participated in equipment and function checks on Papa Hotel Delta (one plus ten) and Papa Hotel Alpha (forty minutes), but the word was never passed to launch.

### **AN OPPORTUNITY REJECTED**

Before I left for home, Wayne sent word for me to visit him in his office. Closing the door and assuming a serious, business-like demeanor, he asked me if I would be willing to go to the States for co-pilot training in the Hughes-500P that, left unsaid, would ultimately lead to another version of Sneaky Pete work with the machine. I was shocked. Naturally, cross border North Vietnam missions immediately flashed through my mind. Like all Agency clandestine work, time was of the essence for a decision. I did not know then that an unmentioned person had specifically asked for me. It was not important, for I could not imagine who the individual might be, and, like typical Agency obfuscation, it would only have added to the overall

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<sup>54</sup> Skunk Works: A phrase employed by Kelly Johnson's Lockheed Martin Aircraft engineers located in Burbank, California--the top-secret Advanced Detachment Project (ADP) shop that developed Cold War spy planes. The term was adopted for the White House photo intelligence laboratory by Captain Lloyd Higgins.

intrigue. <sup>55</sup>

What I also did not know was that, sometime prior to this offer, Buddy had invited Wayne to the White House, where they engaged in a long talk about having one of "our own" qualified in the H-500 aspect of the project. From the beginning, it was only Scratch or me in contention. Leaning toward me, Buddy had always admired my conservative approach to a situation, wanting to know all the known pros and cons involved, and my reluctance to jump into a mission without thorough vetting. He often commented about this positive asset. Therefore, I was the natural choice for the training, and the men were not influenced by anyone in Washington or elsewhere. Consequently, Rogers selected me when the H-500P slot opened up.

I was overwhelmed by the offer, but before committing myself, I asked Wayne to allow me to consider the offer overnight. I would provide him an answer the following day when I was off the schedule.

Tending to convince me to reject the offer, I was not keen about transitioning to an egg-shaped helicopter, one I considered quite fragile and sensitive, that I had previously flown only a few minutes from Pakse to PS-44 with Captain Nikki Fillipi (DOH 06/21/67). Buddy had showed us the Hughes modified ship at PS-44 one evening after dark. He described some of the

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<sup>55</sup> Years later, while talking to Dan Smith, PIC of the H-500P Vinh phone tap mission, at the Bell Helicopter Family Center in Isfahan, Iran, I learned that he was the individual who had requested me for his co-pilot. Lloyd Lamothe (the giggler) had been bilged out of the program for an unknown reason. This was quite a revelation, as I never suspected it was Dan. Had I known this, I might have participated, for I liked and respected the guy enormously. EW Knight Emails, 12/26/00, 12/27/00. According to Wayne Knight neither he nor Buddy Rogers knew about Dan Smith's request for a left seat navigation partner or asking for me by name. They acted independently in their pilot selection. But the request for me must have come from somewhere and tends to reinforce the compartmentalization of clandestine projects and Agency paranoia.

installed black box marvels and upgraded versions of the aircraft. As we Twinpackers shared many of the same high-tech goodies (LORAN, NVG), I was not overly impressed or eager to fly the machine.

There were other overriding negative issues involved in my decision making:

Details regarding pay, future missions, and permanency in such a program were necessarily vague or largely unspecified. There was the issue of acting as a second pilot. I did not mind flying Co-Captain with Kanach. For many reasons, I trusted Scratch implicitly, but a stranger who was PIC. No. For too long in 1962-1963, I had served my time in hell as a First Officer. I did not appreciate someone else telling me what to do, particularly individuals I considered not nearly as proficient in flying and navigation as I. After being upgraded to Captain, I vowed never to fly second fiddle to anyone again. Moreover, the one to two months estimated for training, away from home, was not appealing. I would sorely miss my family, and with greedy IRS agents already breathing down our necks, I was unsure of the tax implication. On a diminishing scale of undesirable items, I had no cold weather gear for the season.

On the positive side, even though courtesy of the failed union contract, my Senior Instructor Pilot designation would soon be a thing of the past, I was the second senior and most experienced man in the S-58T program. I liked this aspect and the respect that it generated. Despite compressor stall problems, I sincerely liked flying the Twinpac, and assumed that because of Kanach's dual role flying the Chinook, I would soon be flying command Special Project missions.

That evening, without going into details, I asked Tuie what she thought about my journeying to the States for an extended period. Naturally, she did not want me to go. Her frank and



honest reply, and my reluctance, made up my mind and sealed my intention to refuse the offer.

With a day off the schedule on Friday, but still on standby for the tap team recovery, I used the opportunity to type a letter home on my Olympia script typewriter obtained at the Naval Fleet Club Post Exchange in Hong Kong. The missive was newsy and, as already mentioned, told of the recent C-123 downing near Thakhet. Don Valentine had sent a rare letter informing me of a fire caused by a careless welder at Ski Times Square that destroyed a portion of the new condominium project. He indicated that the damage was covered by property insurance, but that Sunray would be negatively impacted by the additional construction interest not covered under the policy, and the extended time that would be required to reconstruct the damaged project.

*"The Arizona projects (Dan Carson inspired) are coming along and we still have hopes for them...I am toying with the idea of buying one of the units in our Belle Haven project. How would you like to live in Scottsdale, Arizona?"*

*Amanda has one tooth finally and Ricky is losing two more...Pete has had some tonsil trouble lately...If I can get some time off this month we will go to Bangkok as Amanda needs a smallpox or measles shot.*

*We are still getting paid and actually got a slight raise. After a ceasefire is signed in Laos, I expect that our project pay will be completely taken away. So, I am expecting a 30 percent pay cut this year...It remains to be seen if we will still be shot at. In that case the job will have outlived its usefulness.*

*I keep hearing that a ceasefire is imminent but can't really believe that it can be policed or will last. I heard that*

***an ICC aircraft in Vietnam has already been fired on and the copilot wounded. I understand that he was Polish."***

Letter Home, 02/16/73.

That same afternoon, I drove the green colored family Ford Cortina station wagon to the Air America facility to post the letter and inform Wayne of my decision not to journey to the States for H-500P transition, and whatever training was programed. Wayne called Buddy, and I reiterated my decision to him over the phone. Never imagining that I would turn such an offer down, he became a bit flustered and asked us to come to his office to talk. I agreed, but also resolved to maintain my position.

Like a good trooper, I was soon standing tall in front of his desk. Using his suave manner, Rogers began saying that I should consider the H-500P offer a very great honor. Without divulging a name, he indicated that I had been requested by one of the project's principals. I learned that pay would be based on the average of hours flown during a year, but this was not particularly attractive, for it did not include extra pay received from Special Project missions. I asked why he had not chosen Scratch, and failed to receive an acceptable answer. For obvious reasons, other details remained sketchy and I chose not to ask many questions. In the end, despite all Buddy's smooth talking, and encouragement from the grinning Wally Smith, I did not waver in my decision not to participate in the Hughes 500 program. I could see from Buddy's face that he was quite unhappy, and it was embarrassing to disappoint the man. You just did not turn the Agency down too many times, and I wondered how

my refusal would affect my Special Project status. (It did not.)<sup>56</sup>

Requiring someone to immediately fill the slot, within a day or so, the Agency people at AB-1 quietly selected Al Cates, who agreed to go for training soon after being asked. They were equally closed mouth with Al, not informing him what the training was for or anything else. They just told him to go without providing any details. He was to arrive at a certain hotel in Los Angeles at a certain time. Cates then spent March and April flying and training with Dan Smith in the H-500P from Edwards Air Force Base, a total of sixty-six hours. Among others, Rip Green was there. Cates considered the training an interesting experience. They worked very hard and he believed the Customer was happy with the progress. Then, for an undivulged reason, the mission was scrubbed, and Al returned to the Twinpac program in May.<sup>57</sup>

No longer interested, and wanting to forget the entire episode, I was unaware that Cates had been recruited for the training position that I had turned down. Enmeshed in other aspects of the Special Project, I had forgotten about the Agency offer to fly the H-500P until one early morning, sitting in the B-bus, while picking up Flight Mechanic Dave Crowell. Other houses in the compound were rented to Frank Beaty, Charlie Basham, and the Cates family. Mrs. Cates and the twin girls were outside. At that moment I realized that I had not seen Al for

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<sup>56</sup> EW Knight Email.

<sup>57</sup> Al Cates communication with the Author. Although he was not informed of the exact purpose of training at the time, apparently some kind of drug interdiction mission was planned for the helicopter in the tri-border area (Laos, Burma, and Thailand) of the Golden Triangle.

Stateside training continued in the H-500P, for we later heard that a man named Buckner, who had been at PS-44 during the early period of the Vinh tap mission, had been killed while night flying in the machine.

some time, and that he must have been the person selected to take my place for H-500P training.

### **WIRETAP BUSINESS**

Brief radio contact had finally been established by a Twin Otter crew with the leader of the tap installation team. After completing their wiretap mission, they had been hotly pursued by an enemy patrol, but managed to elude them for the moment. Agreeing not to attempt further radio communication until ready for pickup, a tentative time and place on Phou Louang was established for exfiltration.

We collectively arrived at Air America operations at 1330 on Saturday the 17th. After verifying Papa Hotel Alpha's airworthiness and electronic navigation function (LORAN and CDI), we went to the White House for a last-minute briefing. It was minimal, for not much information was known regarding the team's questionable disposition, only that Rogers believed that it was worth an attempt to retrieve them. Not knowing what terrain we would encounter, we loaded the rope ladder at the Q warehouse.

Our standard track north once again took us by the "Damn Site" to The Alternate for fuel. Upon arrival at LS-339, we awaited further information from our designated Otter support aircraft. The news we received was not what we wanted to hear. There had been no further contact with the team since early that morning, and no visual sighting in the evening. Still, as we were already in place, we elected to launch for the proposed pick-up spot to see if the team had arrived.

While passing in the vicinity of the Moung Heim valley and Route-6, I observed wide, white dirt roads churned up by bulldozers. I had not been in this particular area in Military



The downstream business portion of the hydroelectric dam on Ritaville's western ridge. The reservoir to the upper portion of the photo contained discharge from the Nam Ngum and its upper reaches.  
Author Collection.

Region Two for a long time, and it appeared that since seizing the province, the enemy had been very busy developing logistical arteries and LOCs.

Perhaps still moving or in hiding, the team never arrived at the proposed landing zone. We searched a little from the north side of Phou Louang, but did not want to expose our intent to the enemy. Therefore, following a stressful and frustrating evening, the two crews retraced the track and RTB. We blocked in at 2155 and headed home. (Six plus fifty-five, three hours night.)

Following a day off at home to rest, on the 19<sup>th</sup>, we were scheduled to fly Papa Hotel Alpha to PS-44, maintain night proficiency, and await reemergence of the tap team. Although it did not greatly affect the monthly paycheck, once again I was assigned to log deadhead even though I performed cockpit duties. (Three plus ten.)

With two Twinpacs located at the site, I was assigned to fly Papa Hotel Delta the following night. Bill Long was my Flight Mechanic. I conducted training sessions with Dan Zube and Hank Edwards, making sure that everyone I was responsible for was proficient on all items pertinent to our task. (Four plus thirty-five night, ten landings.)

On the 21<sup>st</sup>, I flew Delta with Zube and Long. (One plus ten.) During the late afternoon, we received word that the wiretap team had established contact with an orbiting Otter crew. They were still on the move, so because they had been without food or water for some time, Buddy issued plans to extract them the following day during daylight. We were recalled, so I deadheaded to Udorn on Papa Hotel Alpha, and arrived after 2300 hours. (Three plus fifteen.)

**SUCCESS**

On the first day of the scheduled Lao ceasefire implementation, we checked in at 0645 hours for a daylight extraction. We were informed that by noon, as per the bilateral agreement between the RLG and NLHS, all American military air assets would be unavailable in Laos. The days of Air Force MiGCap, and calling for air power in a pinch, were over and soon the commies would rule the airspace.

So as not to compromise the mission or themselves, the team had clandestinely moved a considerable distance away from the tap location. The principal recovery area selected was considered adequate. Located on the long, narrow Phou Louang ridgeline, the landing zone was on remote, difficult-to-negotiate terrain, deemed reasonably safe from enemy probes. However, landing in such a tangled jungle environment presented a problem for a fairly large helicopter like our S-58T. For this reason, anticipating the worst conditions, we loaded the bulky rope ladder on Papa Hotel Echo. Provided with rations for only a week, aware that the men had been deprived of basic sustenance, and living off the land for many days, the Customer loaded rations and water onboard our ship.

The two-ship contingent consisted of Captains Bill Hutchison and Hank Edwards, and their Flight Mechanic as our back-up and SAR counterpart ship in PHA; Scratch, Deak, and I remained the primary mission aircraft.

Jim Pearson was away on STO, so Pete Parker, another Twin Otter Captain in the Special Project was designated the fixed wing support aircraft. Pete and his wife Happy were a popular couple in our small social group. While we were en route, Pete established contact with the eight-man team, who indicated that they were in place, and anxiously awaiting pickup.

Shielded from enemy eyes from across Route-65, we approached at a low altitude from the north side of Phou Louang. The walls of the ridge were sheer, almost vertical for about 1,000 feet. Located in a typical jungle setting, the area was covered from top to bottom with low trees, and heavy foliage that included lush banana plants.

From our altitude, neither crew was able to establish positive identification of the team's designated signal. Circling higher, Pete finally spotted it and elected to help. Pete began a diving high speed pass to point out the landing zone. However, he never indicated his intentions to us, and in the process came dangerously close to triggering a mid-air collision. At the last moment, Hutch flared violently, while the Otter flashed under the Twinpac. The encounter was close enough that Hank recognized Pete in the cockpit. The Otter was in Hank's blind spot, so if Hutch had not seen Pete and taken immediate and effective action, he believed they would have been relegated to history. <sup>58</sup>

Scratch approached the ridge and hovered slowly as close as possible to the waiting team. It was apparent that we would not be able to land, so Deak deployed the ladder. Hovering high out of ground effect, I monitored power and called out torque settings. At this point, given optimum conditions and adhering to the plan, we apparently had sufficient power to spare that would enable us to complete the job.

Next, as in Robert Burns 1785 poem *To a Mouse* and John Steinbeck's paraphrased adaptation of this in his 1937 novel *Of*

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<sup>58</sup> This incident paralleled another similar occurrence when we departed PS-44 with a minigun to provide help with the Neil Hanson, Bill Crothers SAR. Hutch was flying from the right seat heading east at a moderate altitude toward Lao Ngam, when I spotted a Volpar on a collision course with us. Immediately ripping the controls out of Hutch's hands, I assumed control, and we fortunately avoided an accident.



*Mice and Men*, "The best laid plans of mice and men, oft go awry," the unforeseen occurred. The team leader had been pre-briefed by Parker, and was instructed to have his men climb the ladder one or two at a time. However, thoughts of survival and extreme deprivation ruled the day; starving, dehydrated, anxious to "get out of Dodge", all eight men began ascending the ladder. Despite Deak's frantic hand signals and efforts to dissuade them otherwise, they would not be denied an opportunity to leave the area.

As the number of men climbing the ladder increased, Scratch continued to add power until I advised him that we were approaching the maximum power red line. Any additional power demand would be negated by the torque limiter. Further increase in demand would cause RPM droop, rotor blade coning and loss of lift, and a likely engine over temperature.

The situation presented an impossible state of affairs. Unable to stabilize the helicopter at a steady hover, we began slowly settling toward the mountain cliff. Unless Deak shot some of the men off the ladder, at best an unpopular and controversial decision, it was obvious that we would eventually crash.

After surviving the hairy episode at LS-339, I had mentally prepared for this moment. Therefore, without a moment's hesitation, I reached down and activated the auxiliary tank release switch. It worked. Lighter by 900 pounds of fuel and metal, our descent immediately ceased. But the task was not over. While we remained exposed at a high hover, fighting a strong main rotor downwash and the whipping ladder, the struggling team required a considerable time to ascend to the cabin section. Highly motivated after so long in enemy territory, the gutsy men achieved their goal. Exhausted and famished after being reduced to foraging for berries, bananas,

grubs, and whatever else was deemed edible from the jungle, they were excited to be on the way home. Once onboard and en route to a far better place, they enthusiastically tore into the rations and water.

We deposited the team in the AB-1 area for a thorough debriefing, rest, and relocation. Then, we taxied to the Air America parking area and blocked in at just prior to 1800 hours. I felt good, and I was sure the rest of the mission participants joined me in my elation at the success involved returning the team to safety. <sup>59</sup>

Not immediately divulged to us, initial signals received by Otter crews from the tap were considerably degraded, often intermittent, or nonexistent, a scenario that closely paralleled the Vinh tap mission. Although a final evaluation of the situation had not been conducted by in-house technical gurus, it was assumed the tap devices may have been incorrectly installed on the wrong wires. Further investigation would be necessary. Pending this, after discussion, a decision would be made as how to proceed. In the meantime, we would standdown until further notice.

While checking signal viability, 42Z, or an Otter crew searched for evidence of the dropped fuel tank for days. Finally, at a surprise ceremony at the White House, Buddy presented me with an enlarged black and white photograph mounted in a beautiful teak wooden frame with a green border. The picture showed where the external tank had struck the mountainside on its journey to the bottom. There was evidence that the tank had split apart and spilled JP-5 fuel, killing vegetation for a hundred feet or so, and clearing a definitive

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<sup>59</sup> Hank Edwards Email.  
Jim Pearson Email.

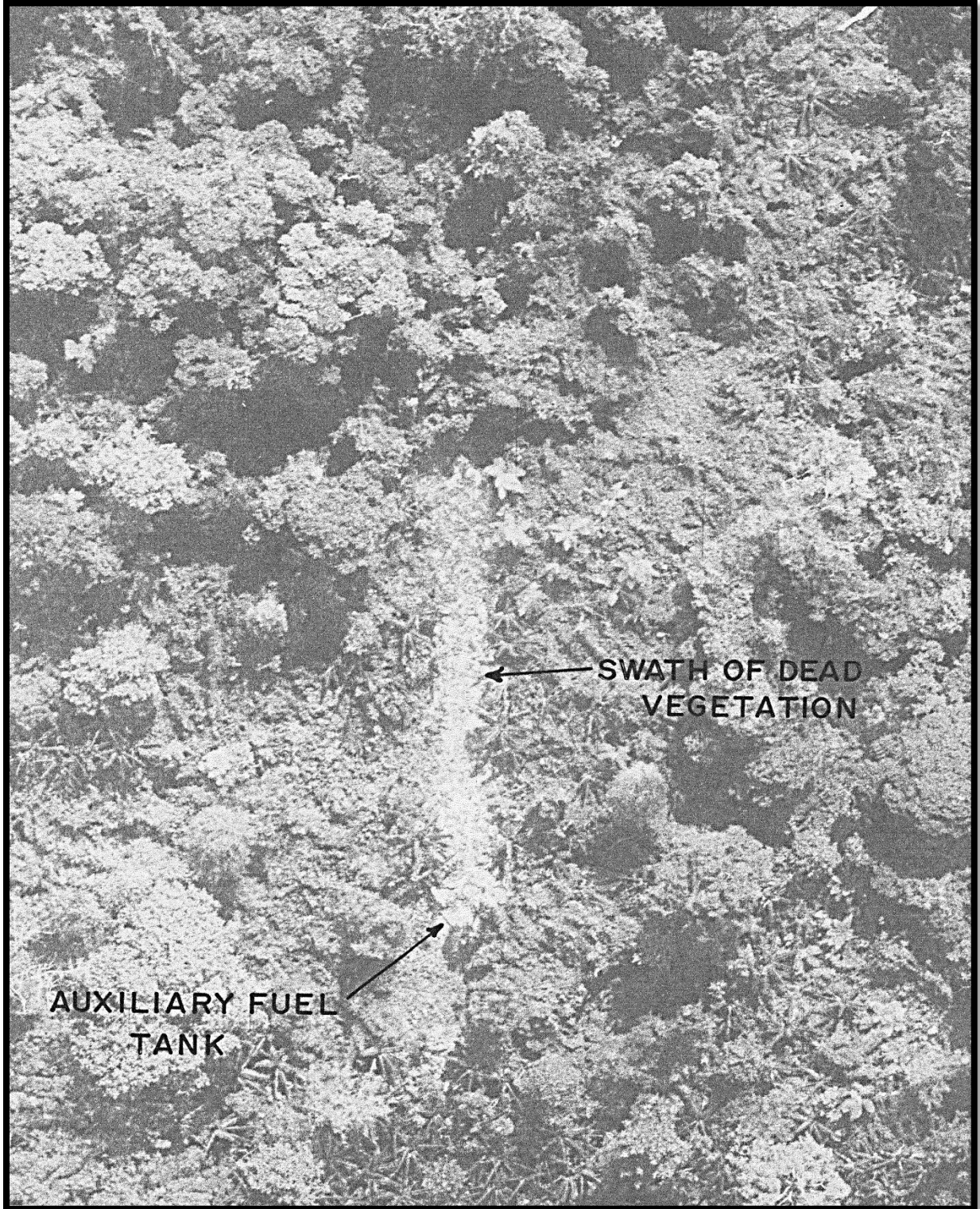


Photo of the auxiliary fuel tank impact and path through the jungle on the sheer north slope of Phou Louang.

Author Collection

swath through the jungle. Organized as a joke, it seemed to me that the AB-1 unit had devoted a lot of effort and money to accomplish this, but the friendly gesture generated a hearty laugh and added to the camaraderie and esprit of our unit. <sup>60</sup>

### **AT LAST A CEASEFIRE**

In the days leading up to the Lao ceasefire agreement, on 17 February Royal Lao Government (RLG) negotiator, Pheng Phongsavan, was asked by a U.S. Embassy staff member whether he had suggested to Phoumi Vongvichit, secretary general of the Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS) to again consider separating military from political aspects in the ceasefire. Phoumi continued to refuse to entertain this proposal.

[Ambassador Godley indicated in his message] *"In view of the North Vietnamese commitments to us on the subject, I can only conclude that (A) the North Vietnamese have failed to make their position known to the [Pathet Lao], or (B) their influence is insufficient to persuade [PL] to accept this position, or (C) that Phoumi Vongvichit is not faithfully implementing instructions from Sam Neua...the [Lao Patriotic Front] (LPF) have not separated these two issues in the secret negotiations in Vientiane.*

*...Message from Hanoi reported on Le Duc Tho's statement to you that the time-frame for the troop withdrawals should be linked to a political settlement. You suggested 30 days as an appropriate maximum delay for troop withdrawal and Le Duc Tho*

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<sup>60</sup> I still possess the enlarged dropped fuel tank black and white photograph Buddy Rogers provided me, but employ the picture frame for another purpose--a collection of Air America helicopter pilot photos from the early days, arranged by Bart Brigida.

said the [Pathet Lao] prefer 90 days, presumably for both troop withdrawal and the political settlement..."<sup>61</sup>

..."At this morning's Cabinet meeting at 1000, Cabinet rejected Souphanouvong's offer of an unsigned strictly military ceasefire proclaimed unilaterally by each side to its own combatants and its allies. Cabinet instructed Pheng to propose written ceasefire agreement calling for (1) end to fighting on the ground, on water and in the air; (2) an end to hostile military action; (3) withdrawal of foreign troops; and (4) an exchange of prisoners of all nationalities.

...Pheng met with Phoumi to present RLG reply to Souphanouvong's offer and also to discuss RLG counter offer. Phoumi rejected RLG proposal and Pheng rejected Souphanouvong's offer. The two negotiators then agreed to discuss the three remaining outstanding issues holding up the signing of a global accord. Pheng and Phoumi settled the outstanding differences as follows.

1. The RLG would sign for the 'Government Vientiane...'
2. The position of Prime Minister will not be included in the overall complement of Cabinet portfolios, from which the Pathet Lao and their allies will receive fifty percent of the seats. No Vice Prime Minister will be named.
3. On the time frames, the two negotiators agreed to form the new provisional Government of National Union within thirty days after the signing of the ceasefire agreement. Within sixty days after the formation of that government, all foreign forces will have to be withdrawn from

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<sup>61</sup> FRUS #19, 02/17/73, Message from the Ambassador to Laos (Godley) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) in Beijing, China, .

*Laos...The exchange of prisoners would also be completed within sixty days of the formation of the new Government of National Union.*

***"Unless there is a last-minute hitch, a 'global ceasefire' covering both the military and political aspects of a Lao settlement will be signed in Vientiane tomorrow afternoon, February 21. If this timetable is kept, the ceasefire will become effective noon February 22."*** <sup>62</sup>

As scheduled, the signing of the agreement for the Restoration of Peace and Reconciliation took place at Souvanna Phouma's villa on the 21<sup>st</sup>, and the ceasefire declared on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. However, unlike the 1962 Accords, there was no backing from the original fourteen signatories of Lao neutrality. This time the agreement was tailored specifically for the two Lao participants.

News media outlets were on top of this momentous news. The following article reiterated and expanded some of the above:

*"The warring Laotian factions today signed a cease-fire agreement scheduled to take effect at noon Thursday, or midnight EST tonight.*

*The terms are similar to those of the 1962 Geneva Accord, which stopped the fighting in Laos for a time but brought no lasting peace.*

*In addition to the cease-fire, Interior Minister Pheng Phongsavan said the agreement calls for:*

*Formation of a provisional government of national union with half the cabinet posts going to rightist and neutralist non-communists and half to the communist Pathet Lao. Prince*

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<sup>62</sup> FRUS, #20, 02/20/73, Backchannel Message from the Ambassador to Laos (Godley) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) in Beijing.

*Souvanna Phouma, the 72-year-old neutralist premier who has headed the government since 1962 is expected to retain the post.*

*Formation of a mixed political council to organize elections.*

*Release of all prisoners and withdrawal of all foreign troops within 90 days. Some 300 U.S. airmen are listed as missing after being shot down in Laos, but the North Vietnamese have given the U.S. government the names of only seven American servicemen and two civilians held prisoner in Laos.* <sup>63</sup>

*Supervision of the agreement by the same three-nation International Control Commission that was unable to supervise the 1962 agreement. It is made up of Canada neutralist India, and communist Poland.*

*Pheng also said Vientiane, the administrative capital, and Luang Prabang, the royal capital, would be neutralized to guarantee the security of the government. [Security for the Pathet Lao members of the provisional Government of National Union would be assured in the two capitals by a joint police force. Security for Pathet Lao members would be provided by a battalion of Pathet Lao infantry in Vientiane and a smaller force in Luang Prabang].* <sup>64</sup>

*Interior Minister Pheng Phongsavan signed for the government, and Phoumi Vongvichit, secretary-general of the Pathet Lao's political arm, signed for the communists. The signing took place at prince Souvanna's villa in Vientiane amid the popping of champagne corks and cries of 'bravo' from foreign diplomats.*

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<sup>63</sup> Author Note: If not captured by the Vietnamese, particularly those injured, many airmen downed in Laos were murdered, or died of gross abuse, malnutrition, and health issues in captivity. Captured cross border SOG operatives may have also suffered the same fate.

<sup>64</sup> Oudone Sananikone, *CHECO Indochina Monographs, The Royal Lao Army and U.S. Army Advice and Support* (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1979), 151.

*The text of the agreement was not made public immediately.*

*There also was no immediate announcement of when U.S. air attacks on North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces in northern and southern Laos would end. These troops have been putting pressure on government forces in recent weeks, and U.S. B-52 bombers and fighter-bombers have been flying some 200 strikes a day against them from bases in Thailand.*

*The U.S. Pacific Command in Honolulu [CINCPAC], which now makes all announcements about U.S air operations in Laos and Cambodia, said strikes continued as usual in Laos Tuesday at the request of the Laotian government.*

*The cease-fire agreement also means the withdrawal of all American military advisors to the Royal Laotian Army, a large number of Thai mercenaries the United States has been paying to fight for the Vientiane regime and American military and CIA personnel who have been working with General Vang Pao's army of Meo tribesmen.* <sup>65</sup>

One concern was that, following the ceasefire, fighting would continue in the country. Orders had been issued from high commands of both sides that all fighting was over and units were to remain in place until advised otherwise...It was very interesting and a surprise to learn from the Pathet Lao that they never had the North Vietnamese Army on their side. After the ceasefire, the fighting that continued was caused by the Vietnamese units in Laos.

After many years of warding off communism in Laos, the right-wing politicians and army brass considered themselves cheated, sold out by Souvanna Phouma, who had pressured them into accepting what amounted to an appalling agreement that they considered tantamount to surrender. This attitude extended to

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<sup>65</sup> *The Star Ledger*, 02/23/1973. Laotian Accord Ends 10 Years of Civil War.



U.S. Embassy personnel, who threatened to withdraw all support if the agreement was not accepted. <sup>66</sup> Theoretically, land controlled by either party at the implementation of the ceasefire was to be retained. Government positions would be clearly marked with red Lao national flags depicting the Erawan, the white three-headed elephant on a red background.

Newton's second law of motion generally states that a body in motion continues in motion. On a human level this is exactly what happened in some areas directly before or after the ceasefire. Not to be denied a strategic location on the Bolovens Plateau, after RLA leaders believed they would retain Paksong, the North Vietnamese struck and captured the town.

In the final analysis the Royal Lao Government was left with only major populated territory around major towns in the Mekong River valley. Rolling back years of advances, in lower Military Region Two, the RLA (mainly Meo and other tribals) only controlled Long Tieng, Bouam Long, and a few other minor sites. The often contested Plain of Jars was held by the enemy.

In Military Region Four, most of the Bolovens Plateau was lost on the same day as the ceasefire and the Sedone Valley was under pressure.

There were other violations:

*"Since the ceasefire went into effect on 22 February, the only significant position to change hands has been Paksong on the Bolovens Plateau. One government battalion that withdrew from the town [under artillery fire] is still holding high ground just east of Paksong, but will probably join the other units retreating west along Route-23. Only heavy air support [no longer on call] had allowed the irregulars to reoccupy Paksong earlier this month.*

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<sup>66</sup> Soutchay Vongsavanh, *CHECO*, 88.  
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 398.

*Small communist units also attacked a Lao Army force along Route-13 north of Khong Sedone late on 22 February and, in the north [MR-2], enemy gunners shelled [and probed] government positions near Ban Na [LS-15] and the Sala Phou Khoun [LS-260] road junction.* <sup>67</sup>

*Meanwhile, in a press conference today Souvanna accused the communists of 29 serious ceasefire violations and claimed he would seek renewed U.S. air support if the violations continued. Souvanna also reportedly stated that his troops would retake Paksong [it never happened]."* <sup>68</sup>

Despite American advisors' announced withdrawal from Laos, North Vietnamese leaders never intended to do the same, for they never admitted that their troops were in the country. Therefore, responding to continued aggression, Henry Kissinger "directed the Department of State to inform Ambassador Godley in Laos and Ambassador Leonard Unger in Thailand [Unger had formerly been ambassador to Laos] that the U.S would continue to provide air support to Laos on request. On the following day Souvanna called Godley to state that [General] Vang Pao was in his office requesting air support and requested that Godley receive Vang Pao to discuss the request and that any request for air support coming from [VP] should be considered as coming from the Prime Minister.

*At the time of the ceasefire Vang Pao's GM-28 [elements of the 700-man force of Task Force Charlie] was defending a position on high ground [south southwest and south of Xieng Khouang Ville] on Route-4 and since the ceasefire GM-28 had been*

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<sup>67</sup> Ken Conboy, 405. At the time of the ceasefire, Thai forces in Laos numbered 17,808. This number consisted of thirty battalions, six heavy weapons companies, six Groupment Mobile staffs, and three task force headquarters. By March, the number of volunteer Thai troops had diminished by 3,000 who had deserted to seek other work.

<sup>68</sup> CIA Bulletin, 02/23/73.

under continuous communist artillery fire and ground attack, and had been pushed off the position, Vang Pao was reluctant to abandon the area. It would mean giving up land dear to his people. <sup>69</sup> Vang Pao admitted that the situation around GM-28 was fluid and agreed that more detailed planning was required. While [VP] specifically requested support by F-111's, given the smoke and haze that would limit the accuracy of other strike aircraft, Godley convinced him that B-52s would have a greater signal carrying effect.

Godley sent a backchannel message to Kissinger on the 24th stating, 'We are watching the local situation as carefully as possible with a view to U.S. air support. Our position is that we should endeavor to avoid using U.S. air support except in instances where enemy clearly violates ceasefire and U.S. air would be truly effective. If such instances develop, we will ask for air and I shall certainly inform you.' <sup>70</sup>

The following day, Vang Pao pleaded his case for air support to Ambassador Godley at the U.S. Embassy. He again described the plight of GM-28 in the Xieng Khouang Ville area.

Godley answered:

"He [Vang Pao] was extremely reluctant to seek U.S. air support unless it was absolutely essential for it was in everyone's interest for us to do what we could to maintain the

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<sup>69</sup> Vang Pao recalled the May 1961 ceasefire very well when his Padong garrison, training base, and refugee center was brutally attacked, and he and his charges were forced to withdraw to the safety of Phou Khao.

<sup>70</sup> FRUS #23, 02/23/73, Minutes of Washington Special Actions Group Meeting.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 401.

Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 491.

Henry Kissinger encouraged Souvanna Phouma to request B-52 strikes at both Paksong and GM-28's position. "Nine B-52s and a dozen fighter-bombers [carpet bombed three target boxes] around the outskirts of Paksong less than 24 hours after the ceasefire." That action ended further ceasefire violations in that area.

*ceasefire no matter how fragile it might be. I asked [Vang Pao] if he could not withdraw his troops a bit to the south and if there were not some other positions on which they could establish a defense. Vang Pao, CAS COS [CIA Chief of Station], and I went carefully over the maps and it was quite apparent that there are no defensive positions to which they could withdraw except one about 20 kilometers south...*

*Vang Pao agreed wholeheartedly to the basic point of minimizing U.S. air at this time. He also agreed that his intelligence on GM-28's situation is currently poor...*

*Situation is therefore that [Vang Pao] will assess with CAS personnel the situation of GM-28 and if necessary will submit about three [air strike] boxes to support that unit if it is still under enemy attack..."<sup>71</sup>*

Reports of enemy violations continued:

*"Communist units in the south followed up the capture of Paksong at mid-day on 22 February by attacking and dispersing a government battalion occupying static positions west of Saravane.*

*In the central panhandle, the communists fired mortar barrages at government positions east and south of Thakhet, and preliminary reports indicate that a Lao Army force pushing north on Route-13 from Thakhet was attacked early on 23 February...*

*At a press conference on 23 February, Prime Minister Souvanna said that he would protest the violations to the International Control Commission. Souvanna also said that his forces would 'pay any price' to retake Paksong.*

*International reaction to the ceasefire announcement had been predictably positive. Peking's People's daily extended warm*

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<sup>71</sup> FRUS, #24, 02/24/73, Back Channel Message from the Ambassador to Laos (Godley) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Vientiane.

*congratulations, hailing the agreement as a 'tremendous victory for the Lao people.' Soviet diplomats in Vientiane and TASS commentators in Moscow have likewise welcomed the agreement. North Vietnamese leaders...sent official congratulations to Lao communist leader Souphanouvong, calling the settlement a 'success of the militant solidarity of the three Indochinese peoples' and pledging North Vietnamese support."* <sup>72</sup>

Intelligence reports continued to report military violations:

*"In the south, only minor clashes near Khong Sedone and Thateng and isolated shelling west of Paksong have marred the ceasefire during the past two days.*

*Communist troops in the central panhandle on 25 February attacked a government unit along Route-13 north of Thakhet for the second time in three days and again forced the irregulars to fall back. Near Moung Phalane [on Route-9], however, [NVA] troops told villagers in the area that some units would be leaving as soon as [PL] replacements arrived.*

*In the area of the [PDJ], communist gunners continued to shell [GM-28] government positions in the hills near Xieng Khouang Ville on 25 February."* <sup>73</sup>

On the 27<sup>th</sup>, communist units were still attempting to clear RLG irregulars from the northern Bolovens Plateau.

*"Mortar attacks...dispersed an irregular battalion along Route-23 several miles south of Thateng, and ground attacks on the same day drove other irregulars from positions near the road farther south. Preliminary reports indicate that fighting continued in this sector on 28 February. In the Paksong area,*

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<sup>72</sup> CIA Bulletin, 02/24/73, Laos: Ceasefire violations have tapered off.

<sup>73</sup> CIA Bulletin, 02/27/73, Laos: The level of fighting continues to decline amid signs that some North Vietnamese units believe they will be returning home soon.

field commanders reported several shelling incidents on 27 February as lead elements of an 800-man Lao Army force edged to within three miles of the town.

Military action continues to wane elsewhere. In the remote northwest, however, communist shellings forced a Lao Army battalion to abandon Moung Mounge [LS-93], a much fought over village some 30 miles north of [Mekong River town] Ban Houei Sai." <sup>74</sup>

Regardless of the ceasefire agreement, Air America crewmembers were never exempt from hostile activity directed at them. Indeed, we had lost people during past ceasefire periods and this one would offer no exception. Seasoned duck hunters were always present, and as in any war zone, extreme caution remained the watchword for our side. <sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> CIA Bulletin, 03/01/73, Laos.

<sup>75</sup> Arthur Dommen *Laos: Keystone of Indochina* (New York, 1985) "In the period that followed the ceasefire, the NLHS stretched out the negotiation of a protocol to the Vientiane agreement as long as possible in accordance with Hanoi's interest in biding its time and keeping its troops inside Laos, pending the advent of the withdrawal deadline of 60 days after the formation of the new government. Their agents in South Vietnam no nearer to achieving success by political means than they had been a decade earlier, needed the continued use of the sanctuary afforded by Laos to prepare their dispositions of troops and supplies for another offensive like those of 1968 and 1972..

With the signature of the 1973 Vientiane Agreement, the long stalemate in Laos came to an end. The NLHS began the process of integrating the rightist faction and rendering the non-commie majority powerless...Militarily, North Vietnam retained what it had conquered in Laos and achieved unimpeded use of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The haste with which the agreement was concluded was not good, a matter of high-level policy-for the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane was only following instructions dictated in Washington at this time.

Kissinger, like Harriman and Sullivan before him in 1962, appears to have overestimated the leverage Moscow and Peking exerted over Hanoi. It was a miscalculation of strategic proportions brought about by high-level policy."

## **PROSPECTS**

Regardless of the ceasefire agreement, the future of Laos appeared grim. Despite the continued optimism regarding a political settlement from government representatives in Vientiane, Lao's abbreviated and checkered history did not reflect such enthusiasm, for from the beginning in modern times it became a political patchwork, enduring domination from extraterritorial entities.

When the French moved to colonialize the region in the 19th century, they cobbled together the fragmented country from three smaller kingdoms, and regarded it a buffer area for their rich holdings in Vietnam. Following World War Two and the subsequent French withdrawal from Indochina in the 1950s, the Kingdom became a victim of its choice location as a strategic logistical corridor from North to South Vietnam for North Vietnam's intention of conquest, and of the conflicting interests of world powers. Moreover, fixes did not work, and Laos alternated between periods of fighting and uneasy accommodation between communists and non-communists.

Despite the bleak outlook, some people in higher echelons believed that Laos could prosper if political conditions would permit. The Mekong River and its tributaries presented Laos with an enormous potential of water power. The Nam Ngum hydroelectric dam project was amortizing its construction costs by supplying cheap electricity to a large section in northeast Thailand.

Officials also believed that Laos could sever the economic stranglehold Thailand held over it if Route-9, running across the narrow waist of Laos, could be developed into an outlet to

the sea. <sup>76</sup>

## **CHINOOKS**

On 18 February, Wayne Knight and Tom Moher a chief helicopter test pilot, who was involved with CH-47 FCFs, worked to get two Chinooks ready for upcountry duty. On the day of the ceasefire, Wayne and Terry Olson (DOH 05/09/71) flew 815858 to Vientiane and back. (FCF one plus fifteen.)

With ceasefire violations underway, and abundant threats apparent, Chinook crews would play an ever-increasing role in support of government positions. Covering many areas and support missions, some days crews worked in three to four different theaters.

Friday, the day after the agreement was implemented, Wayne and Egecrone (DOH 06/07/71) ferried 815864 to Vang Vieng (L-16) to load artillery shells and other supplies for besieged RLA forces at Sala Phou Khoun (LS-260). After that was accomplished, they supplied Bouam Long, where enemy pressure was already building. The day was not over. Returning to Udorn, the crew was assigned to work at Nam Pong (T-712), south of Udorn, where RLA training was underway. (Nine plus forty-five, one fifty night, thirty-five minutes actual instruments.)

Two days later, Knight and Buckley (DOH 07/22/72) went to The Alternate in 815857. They also worked at Vang Vieng and Sala Phou Khoun before returning to Udorn. (Seven plus fifty-five, fifty-five minutes night.) Flying the same helicopter on the 26th, the crew returned to the same sites in a support role. (Six plus forty-nine.) The next morning, performing a route

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<sup>76</sup> Edited version of Robert Kaylor's UPI article, *Story of Laos in One Village*. For a more comprehensive history of Laos, see Author's Book One, *Genesis*, and earlier books.



check, Wayne accompanied Dick Theriault to Long Tieng in Hotel-45. (One plus forty-four.) He then switched to 816019 with Herman Gehring (11/05/70) to participate in an engine change recovery. Then they flew north to work at Site-32. Returning to Udorn, they logged five plus twenty. <sup>77</sup>

## **BOUAM LONG**

A United Press International (UPI) article appeared concerning Lima Site-32.

*"This isolated government stronghold perched precariously on a series of mountaintops..., epitomizes the problems of the future of Laos.*

*Bouam Long, 125 miles from the administrative capital of Vientiane, is the furthest flung toehold of the government of Souvanna Phouma in northeast Laos. It is impregnable to attack but vulnerable to starvation.*

*In their 5,000 to 7,000-foot-high strongpoints surrounded by moats and barbed wire, irregular troops sponsored by the CIA [and aided by allied air strikes] successfully withstood a siege by the North Vietnamese earlier this year. But with a ceasefire now in effect, the 10,913 hilltribe people gathered around Bouam Long remained surrounded.*

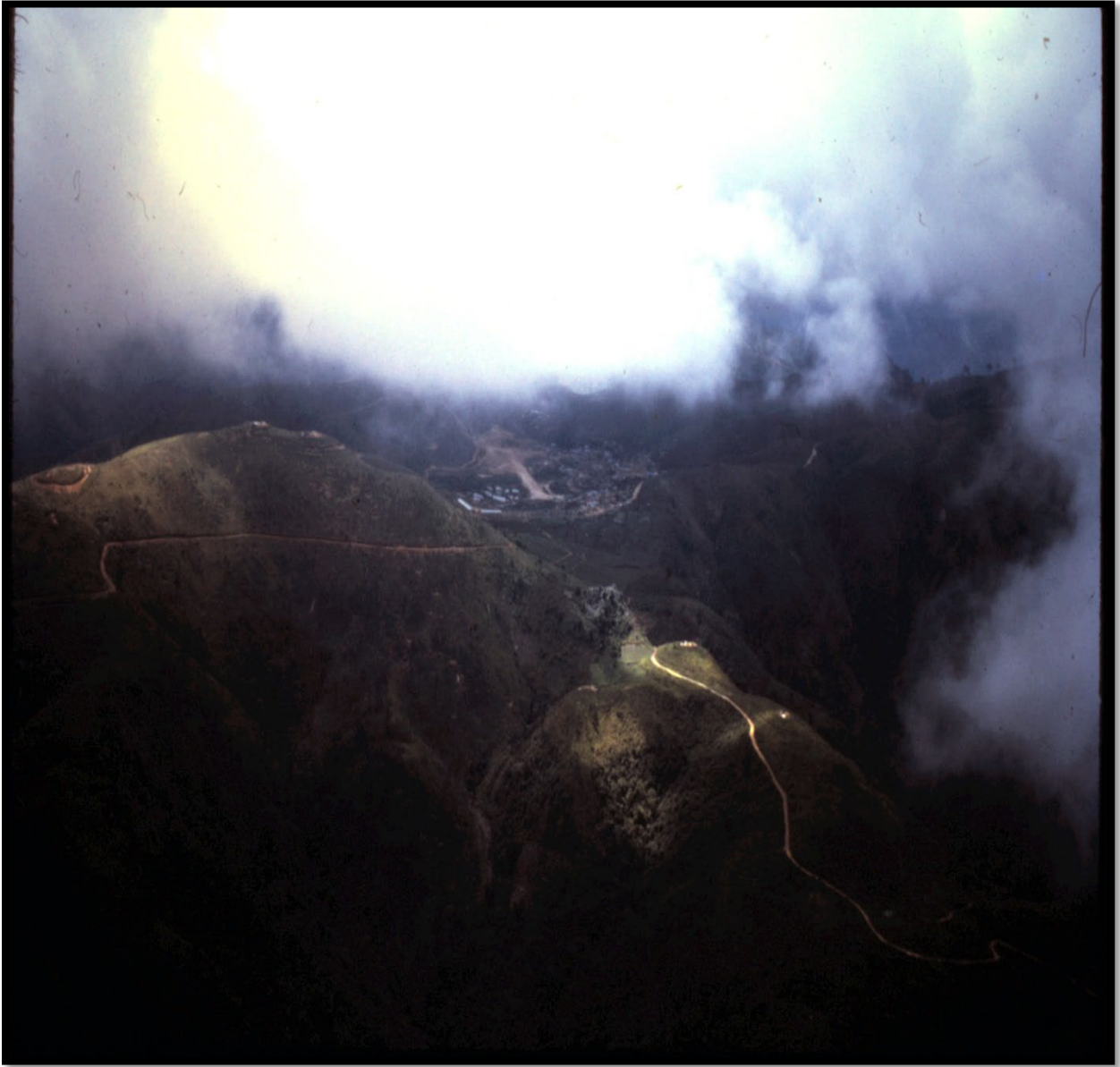
*Cher Pao Moua, a diminutive Meo in green combat fatigues with a woolen muffler wrapped around his neck is the boss here.*

*He stands in his muddy front yard and watches as supply bundles float down by parachute from an American transport plane that circles under low hanging rain clouds.*

*The hilltribe leader's biggest problem is that everything his people need to survive must be flown in. Rice is strictly*

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<sup>77</sup> EW Knight Email, 12/22/00. February flight reports.



Low clouds hang over the approach end of the Bouam Long (LS-32) complex. Meo defensive positions dot the surrounding high ground and roads enabled resupply of positions when helicopter support was not available.

Author Collection.

rationed and consumer items are almost non-existent, as Bouam Long's barren market place attests.

Without U.S. military aid and logistic support, Bouam Long would not be here. <sup>78</sup> Now that the U.S. has pledged to withdraw from Laos within the next few months, the survival of Bouam Long and other places is in doubt.

'There are plenty of questions in my mind,' said one U.S. official with years of experience in Indochina, 'whether Laos can ever become a viable country.'

His statement was echoed by a Western diplomat in Vientiane who thinks the best possible future for Laos is as sort of the split-personality client state, half under the domination of the Vietnamese, half dependent on Thailand to the south, and with China playing a so far unclear role in the north..

...Jipao Moua on his windswept hilltop holds little hope the North Vietnamese will let him alone.

He says that within the past week [NVA] troops have violated the ceasefire to occupy a river valley to the west of Bouam Long [probably the four rivers area of Sop Khao near Phu Cum] which enabled his people to travel back and forth to other government positions. <sup>79</sup>

This access now has been cut off.

The hilltribe leader also says Radio Hanoi, to which he listens regularly, always refers to a withdrawal by Thailand and the United States, but makes no mention of [Vietnamese] troops.

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<sup>78</sup> Author Note: This statement is true, but to clarify it, Bouam Long was established before we entered the Theater. I first visited the site in December 1962 for a Meo New Year celebration.

<sup>79</sup> Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 492. In the months following the Lao ceasefire, Phou Vieng (LS-06), an original Meo Momentum position during and after the First Indochina War, located south of Phu Cum and eighteen miles north of the Plain of Jars, was lost to the enemy.

*There are an estimated 67,000 [NVA] soldiers in Laos, a point the communists do not acknowledge.*

*In an effort to make the Lao Government able to supply places like Bouam Long, the United States [read AAM] has quietly turned over ownership [in January] to the Laotians 10 of the twin-engine C-123 transport planes now flown by highly-paid American charter pilots.*

*Laotian aircrews are being trained to fly the planes. But they could not be able to fill the gap if the fleet of approximately 100 American planes and helicopters that now operate in Laos depart.*

*Jipao Moua is adamant that he and his people cannot leave Bouam Long, where they came after being pushed out of their birthplace closer to the North Vietnamese border. But when asked what he could do if the aerial lifeline were broken, he says that he has no answer..."* <sup>80</sup>

## **JARINA**

During early February, Major General Richard Trefry replaced Brigadier General Vessey as Deputy Chief. <sup>81</sup> Soon after the Lao ceasefire signing, Trefry was assigned to assume the newly created Defense Attaché billet in Vientiane with control over Army Attaché (ARMA), Air Force Attaché (AIRA), and Project-404 operations and personnel. The general's task included

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<sup>80</sup> Robert Kaylor, *United Press International (UPI) news, dateline Bouam Long, Story of Laos in One Village*. Exact date undetermined.

<sup>81</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 366, 371. During December 1971 DepChief moved from Bangkok to Udorn to be nearer the action. DepChief in Udorn was responsible for coordinating external military assistance to the RLG regular armed forces.

reducing the U.S military presence in Laos and enabling FAR, FAN, ADC, and RLAF units to become independent. <sup>82</sup>

Mike Jarina had not been back from home leave long and was considering quitting Air America. One day Wayne Knight asked Mike if he would consider flying the Hughes-500. Mike asked about copilots, for he liked the cockpit left seat open to place his lunch and maps. Asking for a job description, he learned it was covert, including tapes, troop inserts, and night flying. He said, "*It sounds good to me.*" The two ventured into Abadie's office for further vetting. Abadie said that Mike's time was up, and he was talking about quitting. (Dick Elder and Don Henthorn had already terminated their employment.) Abadie was not sure that he could count on him. When Mike asked what kind of guarantee he wanted, the reply was a two-year guarantee. Mike agreed.

Later, when he looked out on the ramp where the H-500s were normally parked, they were gone. When he asked about the disappearance, he was informed that the mission had been scrubbed. <sup>83</sup>

Not long after the ceasefire, about the time Mike Jarina was offered an H-500 job, he was assigned to fly General Trefry and his staff in the morning from Vientiane to Udorn, where he was still responsible as DepChief Udorn, and then back to Vientiane at night. Curious as to why the men did not stay in Udorn at the USAF base, he was told that they wanted to be near the U.S. Ambassador. However, the actual reason was greed; General Trefry and his staff received extra allowances in the form of per-diem, combat pay, and other benefits only available by living in Laos.

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<sup>82</sup> Ken Conboy, 403.

<sup>83</sup> This could have been associated with Al Cates two-month H-500P training in the States and subsequent abandonment of the proposed drug interdiction mission in the Golden Triangle.

Mike had some experience with this kind of milking the government cow. When his family lived in Bangkok, there was a USAF officer living in the same eleven story building complex. In order to earn his flight-combat pay, the colonel would arrange to fly to Saigon at the end of one month and the beginning of the next month, ensuring him two month's flight skins.

A Russian working at the Russian Embassy on Wireless Road also lived in the same building. Everyone living in the apartment house, including the outspoken wife of a Porter pilot, received an invitation to a cocktail party and Russian type movie at the Soviet Embassy. People asked Mike if he and his family were going to attend the party. After Mike indicated that he was, they inquired, "*Aren't you afraid to go? USG certainly doesn't want you to go.*" Still the Cold War, the question was related to communist influence and intrigue by associating with communists. Mike could not believe the dialogue.

He countered, "*What do they have to do with it? What are they afraid of?*" Being retired Navy and drawing a pension, he was still subject to Navy jurisdiction. The Navy probably could have done something, but no one had told him not to go.

Mike and Dee went to the party and enjoyed a pleasant evening. The Air Force colonel who went to Saigon to obtain his flight pay also attended. The outspoken Air America fixed wing wife rudely asked Russians present what they wanted and what were they doing in Thailand. She also asked the Air Force colonel what he was doing there, "*Taking names?*" He indicated, "Yes." Jarina believed him, but did not think USG would do this.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Mike Jarina interviews.

**A COUNTER TO TOTAL ELIMINATION OF THE AAM PRESENCE**

*"What is good for the goose is good for the gander."*

John Ray collection of English proverbs. <sup>85</sup>

In late 1963 and early 1964 the issue of Air America aircraft (mostly the green aggressive-looking Marine H-34s) working in Laos had become a political bone of contention to the leftists, ICC representatives, and finally the Lao government. Therefore, steps were taken to overtly dissolve or transfer the Company to a more non-invasive entity. Although the U.S. State Department conducted semi-serious preparations to achieve this end, because of ensuing military conflict and continued political waffling, the change never came to fruition. <sup>86</sup>

Even before the ceasefire signing in both South Vietnam and Laos, a slow excising of Air America's operational heart was already underway. The concept and implementation of this had begun in previous years because of the Nixon Administration's campaign promise and intention to terminate the Second Indochina War before the next election.

By the 1970s, among Washington hierarchy, Air America was also considered a large, unwieldy organization that was too well known to the American people; one undertaking operations that strayed far from the original Agency mandate, that of a USG arm used to gather and analyze foreign intentions. Consistent with this rationale, downsizing of the Air America fleet and employees was planned in the offices of Langley.

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<sup>85</sup> Although originally intended to explain vagaries between the sexes, this phrase can be used to differentiate the contrast between the communist and Western ideologies and interests in Laos.

<sup>86</sup> For further detail regarding this subject see Book 5, 1964, Seaboard World.

At this particular time, the ceasefire was theoretically contingent on North Vietnamese goodwill and compliance with the agreements. As before, but never learning from history, Washington leaders ordered strict and total compliance with the Lao agreement. This directive included reduced air support that *"assumed the expulsion of Air America when the proposed coalition replaced Souvanna's government."* But, in contrast to this, and to maintain some pressure on the communists, Henry Kissinger wanted *"no reduction of the present reaction capability until the North Vietnamese withdrew."*<sup>87</sup>

Following the ceasefire, the Royal Lao Government again no longer wanted us in their country. Moreover, Air America was fast becoming a liability for Thai officials, who were likely disheartened by USG's Indochina withdrawal. Because of such pressure to dissolve the Company, CJ Abadie was charged to prepare a treatise to tout, illuminate, and justify Air America's continued existence in the Thai-Lao Theater.

Ab wrote, *"While Air America's flying operations in Southeast Asia have become widely known, its extensive capability in the realm of maintenance and related ground support has been less well publicized."*

*The present base at Udorn has experienced a period of constant development, growth and improvement since its establishment during April 1961.*

*As of June 1971, approximately four million dollars had been spent developing the Air America facilities at Udorn. This is exclusive of aircraft and equipment. During fiscal year 1972, 93,300 revenue helicopter and fixed wing contract hours were generated in support of the Lao effort. As of 1 January 1973, 83,356 hours have been flown in USG fiscal year 1973.*

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<sup>87</sup> Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 493.



Approximately 200 Company and Customer aircraft of at least 22 different types are not based and/or maintained at Udorn. The figure includes 132 RLAF aircraft being maintained here.

Air America employs 2,300 people, of which 1,926 are Thai. The Udorn base has grown to the size of a small town. Administration and training space totals 85,700 square feet; hangars, shops, and warehouses total 236,000 square feet, and 1,066,000 square feet of aircraft maintenance hardstands make up a part of the 101-acre Udorn facility. Firefighting force of 33 men and a security department of 102 men provide protection for personnel, government aircraft, and the facilities of the base. A narcotics inspection group consisting of 15 personnel, using trained dogs, perform detailed inspections of aircraft and personnel entering and leaving the facility. Dependents school employs 14 teachers and Principal Verne Clarkson.

As the Air America base grew and developed [under the auspices of Base Manager Ben Moore and his assistant Tex Dew], a policy of integrating Thai employees into positions of greater responsibility was vigorously pursued. At the same time the number of third country nationals was reduced from 254 to 173.

There is a large influence on the local economy. U.S. Employees (267) spend an estimated 500 dollars a month for rent, utilities, goods, and services. Third country nationals spend 200 dollars a month. All use Thai Airways and the Royal Thai Railway.

It should be noted that by the nature of the services performed, that Air America is providing a contract service to various agencies of the USG and all the funds are put into the local economy. The impact is in every way beneficial to the Thai community and economy.

Air America Udorn, by virtue of its organizational structure, its asset in the form of trained manpower and support

equipment is uniquely suited to perform a wide range of aviation-related services within Thailand and Laos. Within our security department we have the capability of assisting in the control of illicit traffic in narcotics by means of our Security Inspection Services (SIS) consisting of three U.S. national supervisors and 12 specially trained Thai inspectors and a German Shephard dog. The Flight Operations Department maintains a flight-watch service for Customer aircraft operating within Thailand and backs up the Air America Vientiane flight watch service which monitors aircraft movements in Laos. Our training department is prepared to provide assistance in ground training of Thai and Lao aircrews, mechanics and other skills. Our ground school instruction capability extends to simulated instrument trainer classes and our IPs are capable of conducting the flight training required to produce proficient pilots for helicopter and light fixed wing operations. Our traffic terminal has the facilities for handling passengers and cargo for all aircraft operated under current contacts from this facility and is able to provide turn-around support for transient aircraft on short notice. It has proven its capability for operating at peak loads under sustained emergency conditions as was necessary for the continuation of the rice program during several annual flood seasons which halted the operation from the Vientiane airfield.

Air America Udorn has frequently been called upon to provide emergency assistance in the public interest. This has ranged from providing fire-fighting aid during several major conflagrations to loaning fogging equipment for mosquito control during a recent epidemic for hemorrhagic fever.

The extensive capabilities of Air America Udorn have been nurtured over a decade at considerable expense of money and effort. They have proven their value and these resources, if not

*preserved or allowed to dissipate would be most difficult to replace.*

*It appears to be in the common interest to preserve the asset Air America Udorn represents in terms of the service that can be provided to USG agencies operating in Southeast Asia; a service that would be most difficult, if not impossible to get elsewhere, and the beneficial effect it exerts on the emerging economy of Thailand.<sup>88</sup>*

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<sup>88</sup> CJ Abadie.

**T**here was a short interlude in our Sam Neua operation while the higher echelon pondered how to proceed with the intelligence gathering project. Despite obvious problems with signals received by our airborne platform would we initiate the next phase, by leaving the tap alone and installing the ADR? Since this issue was not our problem, and we were merely the implementers, we reverted to "normal" Customer work.

Looming on the horizon there was another matter that was about to impact the shakers and movers in Washington-the Nixon Administration's Watergate scandal.

I spent 1 March testing Papa Hotel Echo and training two pilots. Bart Jealous was first (two plus twenty-five IP); Charlie Basham (DOH 10/04/66) the second (forty-five minutes IP). Charlie, a portly individual, was one of the pilots who temporarily transferred from Saigon during the first Plain of Jars operation when our missions dictated that we double cockpit crews. After we lost the Plain in early 1970, he returned to Saigon. Lately, because of dislocations and his seniority, he had elected to make a permanent change of station. We conducted one practice GCA approach at Nam Phong (T-712), the USMC base and Special Forces headquarters south of Udorn. (Four plus fifty-one total flight time, three plus ten IP, ten landings.)

The following morning was scheduled to standby at the field for a trip upcountry. With weather poor in the area, I spent most of the morning at the AB-1 PI laboratory studying aerial photographs of a potential landing zone in Sam Neua province that would accommodate an ADR insertion after a successful wiretap of the Route-65 telephone line.

Saturday morning, I checked in to the Company facility early to board a C-123 616 flight to Wattay Airport. There I embarked on Bell 204B 12F for a one-hour trip to The Alternate. I was to fly with First Officer MD Walker (DOH 07/07/72) and Flight Mechanic Leveriza in XW-PHA. We were assigned to work at Bouam Long, from which the bulk of enemy forces had withdrawn. Site-32 officers and leaders were anxious to take advantage of the respite to bolster area defenses, with a backlog of support missions to supply the numerous outposts. Local slash and burn farmers had been hard at work in the region clearing mountain sides for subsistence and cash crops. Consequently, smoke had inundated the region with a vengeance, so diligence was required in picking our way around the area.

Since we were scheduled to RON at Long Tieng that night, we departed Site-32 late. (Seven plus forty-five, three hours AI, fifteen landings.) Few crews RON there at the time and we stayed in a Portacamp trailer on Sky hill, probably as a conduit for an emergency Customer evacuation.

Smoke and haze were equally bad in The Alternate area, but we managed to work some local defensive positions until experiencing a compressor stall with an accompanying torque split, and temporary, but momentary, loss of power on the offending power section. Not willing to chance further engine problems, I ferried the machine back to Wattay Airport for inspection

and evaluation. (Five plus thirty, two hours AI, ten landings). <sup>1</sup>

PT6-3 stalls continued for the duration of our work in Laos. After all the investigation, troubleshooting, and "fixes" had been accomplished, it was later determined that there was a problem with the combustion chamber liner:

*"The combustion chamber liner is an annular heat resistant steel liner, open at one end and domed at the other. Rings of plain, plunged and shielded perforations, located around inner, outer and domed circumferences allow air to enter the liner and provide optimum fuel/air ratios for starting and sustained combustion [it was these holes that were discovered eroded]. Cooling rings control air flow within the liner, and together with the perforations, ensure an even temperature distribution at the compressor turbine inlet. The domed end of the liner is supported inside the gas generator case by seven of 14 fuel nozzles sheaths, and located by the two spark plugs."* <sup>2</sup>

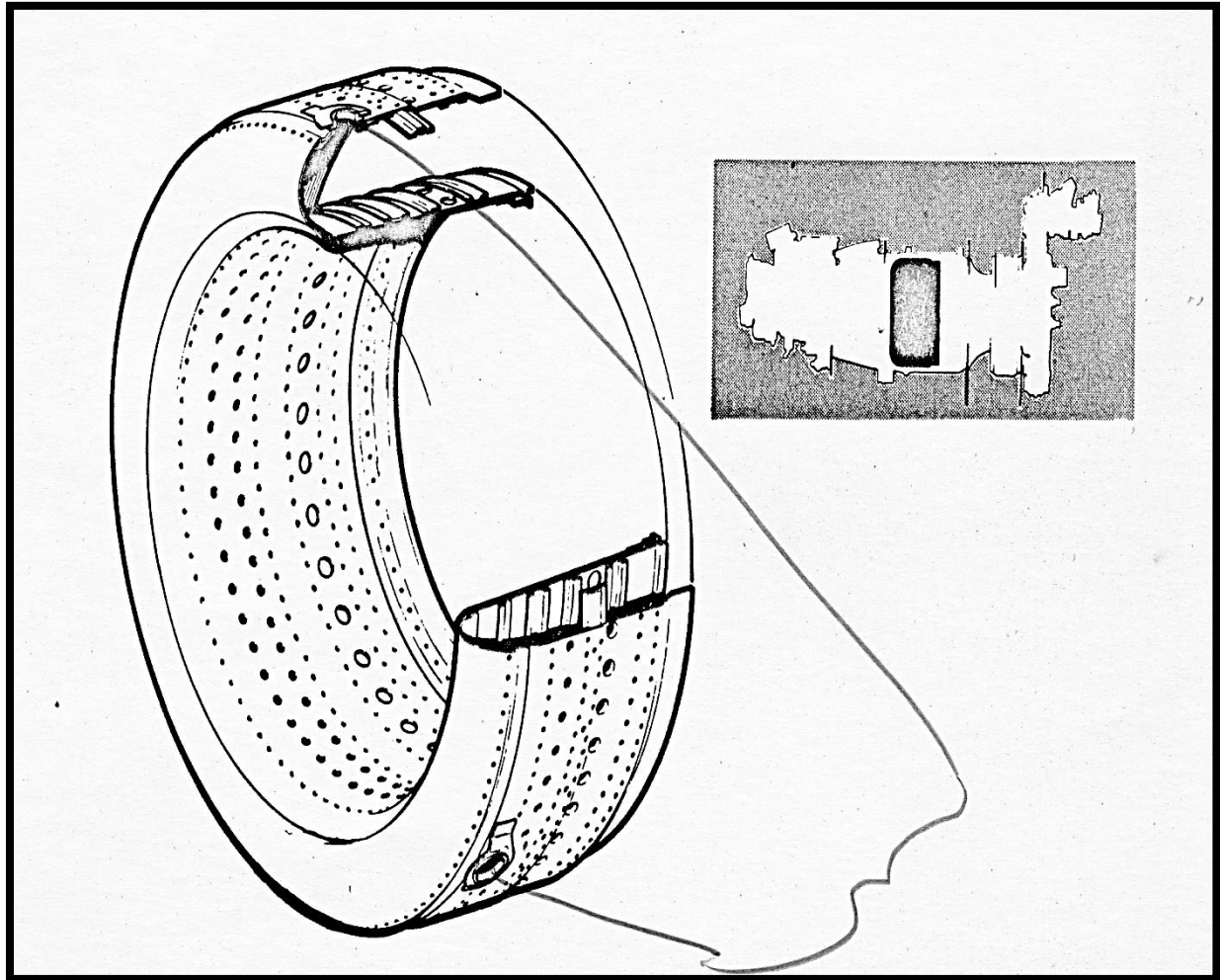
After breakfast at Papa Chu's on the fifth, I deadheaded to Udorn on CASI aircraft Papa Hotel November (PHN). Waiting for me at the field was a FCF of Papa Hotel Delta, and an initial training upgrade of Charlie Basham to second in command (SIC). (Four plus forty, four plus thirty IP.)

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<sup>1</sup> EW Knight Email. Some individuals believed we were generally finished with compressor stalls, as the incidence had been reduced after first re-blading of eroded compressor and then stator blades. What we had failed to understand at the time was that combustion chamber liner holes had eroded and elongated sufficiently to cause disrupted air flow.

According to Jack Forney, this condition was not discovered until after the Air America timeline. Technicians at Pratt and Whitney Canada were bench checking offending power sections, but a serious labor dispute caused a long delay in investigating the engine stalls, and the problem was not totally resolved while we operated the S-58T in Laos.

<sup>2</sup> United Aircraft of Canada Limited PT6T-3 descriptive notes.



The PT6-3 Combustion Chamber Liner. In some engines enough holes had been elongated to cause disruption to a normally smooth air flow and was sufficient to cause compressor stalls.

Author's descriptive notes on the PT-6 engine.



A fort accessible by a road on Skyline Ridgeline high ground to the north and above the Long Tieng valley.

Author Collection.



**CONTINUE TO MARCH**

Receivers and other high-tech electronic devices installed in Twin Otter 74M constantly revealed a signal distortion from the Sam Neua wiretap. Following a substantial rest and adequate sustenance, the tap team was queried again and again to determine if a faulty technique had been utilized during installation. Like problems encountered with the Vinh tap, it appeared that Murphy had once again penetrated the equation to sully our work.

With fresh details in hand, and assuming there was something associated with the team's original training that was unknown, lacking, or overlooked, intensive practice sessions were scheduled and conducted at PS-44 that attempted to include each and every facet of the operation. This would lead to yet another attempt to reposition or reinstall faulty wiretap devices.

There was still substantial pressure from Washington types for hard information from North Vietnam regarding Vietnamese post Lao ceasefire intentions. By the seventh, pending favorable weather, an acceptable moon phase, and decreased enemy traffic along Route-65, a decision was made to reinsert the tap team, this time closer to the objective.<sup>3</sup> With a nod from Langley headquarters to proceed, following a through briefing in Rogers' office on the seventh, Dan Zube, Deak Kennedy, and I departed for PS-44 in Papa Hotel Delta to commence training in preparation for both tap and ADR missions. Forming the crew of the primary insertion ship, Scratch Kanach, Hank Edwards, and Chuck Low followed in Papa Hotel Bravo. For this mission my crew would form the SAR and the covering firepower element with the minigun. (Three plus twenty-five, thirty minutes night.)

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<sup>3</sup> A partial moon was favored for NVG illumination.



Sunset backlighting the Author's S-58T at the PS-44 rocky training complex in southern Laos. Crew quarters and ancillary buildings are situated a hundred yards to the rear of the helicopter.

Author Collection.

## **DISAPPEARANCE ON THE CHINESE ROAD**

Hostility from the terminus of the Chinese Road near Pak Beng in Military region One continued to plague our fixed wing crews. Far to the north on Wednesday, while we were making our way south toward Lima Site-444 (PS-44), Captain James Ackley, First Officer Clarence Driver, and AFDs Chudchai Chiewcherngsuk and Kenekeo Narissak were preparing to leave Luang Prabang in C-123K 554524 for Ban Houei Sai. <sup>4</sup> Current pilot reports (PIREP) indicated thunderstorms, rain, and strong southwest winds would be encountered along the flight track. The crew departed Luang Prabang at 1408 local time and reported an estimated time of arrival (ETA) of 1505 at L-25 to the Luang Prabang radio station. That was the last time the crew reported or was seen that day.

A standard communications search was conducted when no operation normal call was received at the allotted time. Failing to receive an answer, a search and rescue mission was triggered, and soon afterward aircraft and crews were dispatched toward the flight track area. It was late, and time on station was limited, so no sighting was reported.

The next morning, a SAR group consisting of DHC C-7A (Caribou) 605430, DHC-6 N6868, N389EX, and Captain Jim Rhyne flying Beech VTB-18 N9542Z searched the area until 1115 hours when adverse weather prevented further safe flight. <sup>5</sup>

Area searches continued until the 13<sup>th</sup>, when full scale SAR missions were terminated. Up to that time ten aircraft crews

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<sup>4</sup> Clarence Driver, a popular, long-time employee and former USAF colonel had been reduced from Captain to First Officer status following an accident.

<sup>5</sup> Jim Rhyne had a compassionate interest in this SAR, as he had lost part of a leg to AAA fire on 15 January 1972, while dropping leaflets over the same area after the Ritter, Townley downing in late December 1971.

(including an H-500) had logged seventy-five hours without discovering evidence of a downed plane.

The following day, with only two aircraft continuing the search, wreckage of a C-123 was sighted south of Pak Beng. One crew confirmed the tail number of the missing plane, but no survivors were spotted before being driven off by small arms fire. As a result, the C-123 crew was listed as missing in action (MIA). <sup>6</sup>

### **PREPARING FOR ANOTHER TAP INSERTION**

On the eighth, sharing airspace with Scratch and his crew, we continued training for both phases of the wiretap mission in Sam Neua Province. Zube and I concentrated on refining LORAN techniques, and I practiced inserting a mock-up ADR in a nearby tree canopy to assess the degree of difficulty and my ability to install the antenna. Night vision goggles were worn at night to

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<sup>6</sup> William Leary March 1973 notes.

There were a few reports and speculation that a bogus non-directional beacon (NDB) had been installed to lure aircraft over radar-controlled AAA guns. From the early days, false NDBs had been suspected in other parts of Laos. One was on the border of Cambodia and Laos south of Pakse.

Air America XOXO, 03/08/73, Gene Hughey Assistant Chief Pilot, Laos.

Task Force Omega, Inc., Bio, Ackley, James Howard.

*Homecoming 2 Project 15* 1990. Bio, Driver, Clarence, N.

In late 1984 reports were received by elements of USG that Driver was alive, in good health, and being held prisoner with other Americans (he would have been in his 60s at this time). Since no Americans except CASI pilot, Emmet Kay, were returned from Laos and Driver was never seen again and we may never know his exact disposition. Many of these "sightings" were pure scams, contrived by con artists to obtain money from unsuspecting victims. As an example, the Author was in Udorn visiting family members when he was handed a paper purporting to have information concerning regarding a MIA in Laos. Of course, money was mentioned for information. Recognizing it for what it was, I delivered the false handout to the U.S. Consul's office.

enhance familiarity with the devices. (Five plus fifteen, three plus thirty night, ten landings.)

The next day, Scratch and I switched left seat pilots as a form of cross training to assess our abilities to handle the job with a given PIC. Flight Mechanics were also swapped for identical reasons, and Chuck Low flew with us. (Five plus fifty, one plus fifteen night, ten landings.)

Although PS-44 was located on high ground, and the perimeter well patrolled by SGU and Commando Raiders, enemy pressure and potential sapper strikes had always been a concern to those of us remaining overnight. Since the ceasefire had supposedly been initiated the previous month, I was interested to investigate, and follow and observe Route-13 north to Khong Sedone. I had heard that we owned real estate immediately around the town, and was interested to recon the area for myself. It did not take long to ascertain that the entire low ground around the town was quiet and no activity of any kind was noted.

Aware that we had established defensive positions in the western hills overlooking the town, I was curious about their present disposition, and perhaps discarded tools of war that the careless and lazy Lao always left behind. While trolling at low level, there were no signs of human presence discernable. One landing area appeared to have a tin-roofed structure below the north side of the hill. A long wooden box, perhaps containing mortar shells, sat close to the pad. After landing, I instructed Lowe to carefully check the box's contents. It was crammed with loose M-79 grenade launcher ammunition. After a cursory examination for a booby trap, Chuck placed the booty onboard. Looking laterally to the right, I could see many yellow boxes of ammunition stacked under partially collapsed sheets of corrugated tin. We were all curious. I cautioned Chuck to be wary of booby traps before checking, after which he walked a few

yards to examine the cache. Without crawling under the structure, Low was able to assess that there was considerable war materiel stashed there, probably enough to sustain a small war. I thought to myself that this was a typical waste of American taxpayers' money. After some helicopter crew had worked hard shuttling ammunition to the landing zone, the government troops had merely walked off the mountain leaving everything to the elements or the enemy. Moreover, if the enemy moved into this position, the ammunition would be used against us.

We retraced our path to PS-44, where I informed the Customer of the discovery. It was up to him if he wanted to pass the information on to the FAR at Pakse, or take advantage of the bonanza. At the very least, the cache should have been destroyed.

To allay the boredom of so many hours away from home, our handler, Don Stephens, encouraged us to borrow Agency military weapons and ammunition to shoot on the unprepared range that was located down slope, and a short distance west of the bunk house. Some of us considered this activity great fun. Therefore, after I showed Stephens the box full of M-79 rounds, he offered a grenade launcher for our enjoyment.

We made our way to the range with the equipment, and proceeded to engage in several hours of fun. I had never fired an M-79 before and got a kick out of the soft, hollow metallic noise (plop) the round made when exiting the barrel.<sup>7</sup> With training complete and the mission scheduled, after breakfast the

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<sup>7</sup> Al Cates November 2017 phone conversation. Al borrowed an M-16 rifle from Customer Stephens at PS-44 to carry on missions. He placed the weapon in his locker at the Air America facility when he left for H-500P training at Edwards AFB. Because of the missing weapon and the accountability involved, the Customer was quite unhappy with Al upon his return from the States.

next day, I deadheaded home on Papa Hotel Delta. (Two plus twenty.)

Consistent with his policy of getting his feet wet and becoming more involved in the nuts and bolts of the tap mission, Wayne Knight joined Scratch Kanach in a FCF of Papa Hotel Echo. About this time, upper management promoted Knight, and he began transitioning to the Director of Operations (DO) billet. This involved moving to the second floor of the Administration Building to an office next door to CJ Abadie. Although still involved in the Chinook program, his overall flying was curtailed. <sup>8</sup> At the same time Captain Marius Burke was advanced from Assistant Chief Pilot to Chief Pilot Helicopters.

Signing in at a reasonable time of day, I conducted a comprehensive proficiency check in Papa Hotel Bravo with Knight, who was slated to participate in a back-up role during the upcoming tap mission. Bill Long was assigned to accompany us. (One plus fifty-five. IP.) We continued ersatz training with a FCF of Papa Hotel Delta, checking both maintenance and mission equipment. (One plus fifteen.) Then I conducted a similar FCF on Papa Hotel Alpha. (Forty minutes.)

## **MISSION DAY**

Well rested, we gathered at the Air America facility at 1115 on Monday the 12th. After consuming lunch and gathering our

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<sup>8</sup> Wayne Knight Emails, 12/31/00, 01/02/01. By September, Wayne was well ensconced in his new office upstairs in the Administration building. His boss, CJ Abadie felt strongly about his new billet being a non-flying position. However, later Abadie granted Wayne some concessions regarding flying.

The job constituted desk work, not very demanding in most areas of responsibility. Wayne was already well acquainted with most flying and line maintenance work. He often stood in for Ab as Assistant Vice President and sometimes this was demanding...Deputy Chief had a general as their chief in Udorn and he often pushed the parameters for responses to his requests.

equipment, we B-bussed to the White House to receive a final mission briefing. Agency strategy was twofold. Because we had previously entered the area several times and had certainly alerted the enemy to some form of unfriendly activity, this mission was programed to insert the tap team in total darkness. Once on the ground, the team would move east of Ban Kang Mang, where they would either reposition or reinstall misaligned insulator taps. We would then retrieve the men before sunrise. It was an ambitious plan, one that would require many hours of effort and considerable loss of sleep. During the briefing, probably to impress us, we were told the mission was sanctioned by the "highest authority." Although no name was mentioned, discounting the Most Supreme Being, this meant to me that the man at the top-of-the-chain was President Richard Nixon. Instructions that followed included a study of the latest photo recon material. This time, in addition to satisfying a SAR and gunship role, Buddy asked me to create diversions by simulating landings at various locations to confuse the enemy. We had never attempted this before, and it would lead to an interesting situation. For this phase of the operation I was to be issued one of the scarce NVG sets.<sup>9</sup>

With one exception, crews remained as planned: Kanach, Edwards, and Low crewing primary ship Papa Hotel Bravo, and Casterlin, Zube, and Long in Papa Hotel Delta. A third ship,

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<sup>9</sup> Night vision goggles battery: The flat, silver button-sized batteries had a finite life. The batteries either worked or did not. Failure was abrupt and often disconcerting, resulting in a total blackout for the wearer of the NVG. Moreover, changing a battery in the dark was difficult, and required some hands-on practice. The goggles had to be removed, the battery cap unscrewed, and a fresh battery installed. To effect this, we carried a spare or two in our flight suit breast pockets. To potentially extend battery life, they were maintained in a cool refrigerator when not in use. During night training sessions at PS-44, we logged time of usage to attempt predicting when one should be changed.



Papa Hotel Echo, crewed by Lloyd Higgins, Wayne Knight, and Deak Kennedy was cranked into the equation as a backup ship in case primary or secondary helicopters developed maintenance problems or worse. <sup>10</sup> With ample daylight remaining, we repaired to our respective aircraft to load personal equipment and check critical navigation systems. Since a long period in the field was envisioned, we ordered two box lunches each. After taxiing the Twinpacs to the Q warehouse, we shut down to load the wiretap team, the minigun, the backup M-60 machinegun, ammunition, and other sundry items.

Later in the day, we launched for Bouam Long and arrived with some daylight left. Because of the ceasefire provisions and relatively diminished activity at LS-32, the site was deemed a reasonably safe place to stage our missions. Moreover, it was closer to our objective and contained a few more facilities than the bare-bones site at LS-339.

Flying N774, Captains Jim Pearson and Jim Russell were assigned to support our mission. When we arrived at the site, the Otter was already parked beside the airstrip. It would mark Russell's first and last Special Project night mission. While initially cobbling together crewmembers for the Twin Otter Special Project program, Pearson wanted to include individuals who he felt confident were tigers and would perform a good job. However, his boss, Jim Rhyne, restricted by FEPA regulations, would allow him only to choose those with proper seniority, and some of these men failed to satisfy Pearson's requirements. At the time, Rhyne indicated that these men would not participate in STOL flying. Regardless of Rhyne's projected intentions, they ultimately began STOL flying. Therefore, anticipating this

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<sup>10</sup> EW Knight Emails, 12/28/00, 12/30/00. Wayne Knight, who attended the briefing, recalled Rogers' reference to the "highest authority" and correctly surmised it to be Henry Kissinger.

eventuality, in order to separate the men from the boys, Jim insisted that the candidates conduct three landings into the Bouam Long bowl. Successful in this, in order to foster confidence, a fourth landing was tailored as a solo flight.<sup>11</sup>

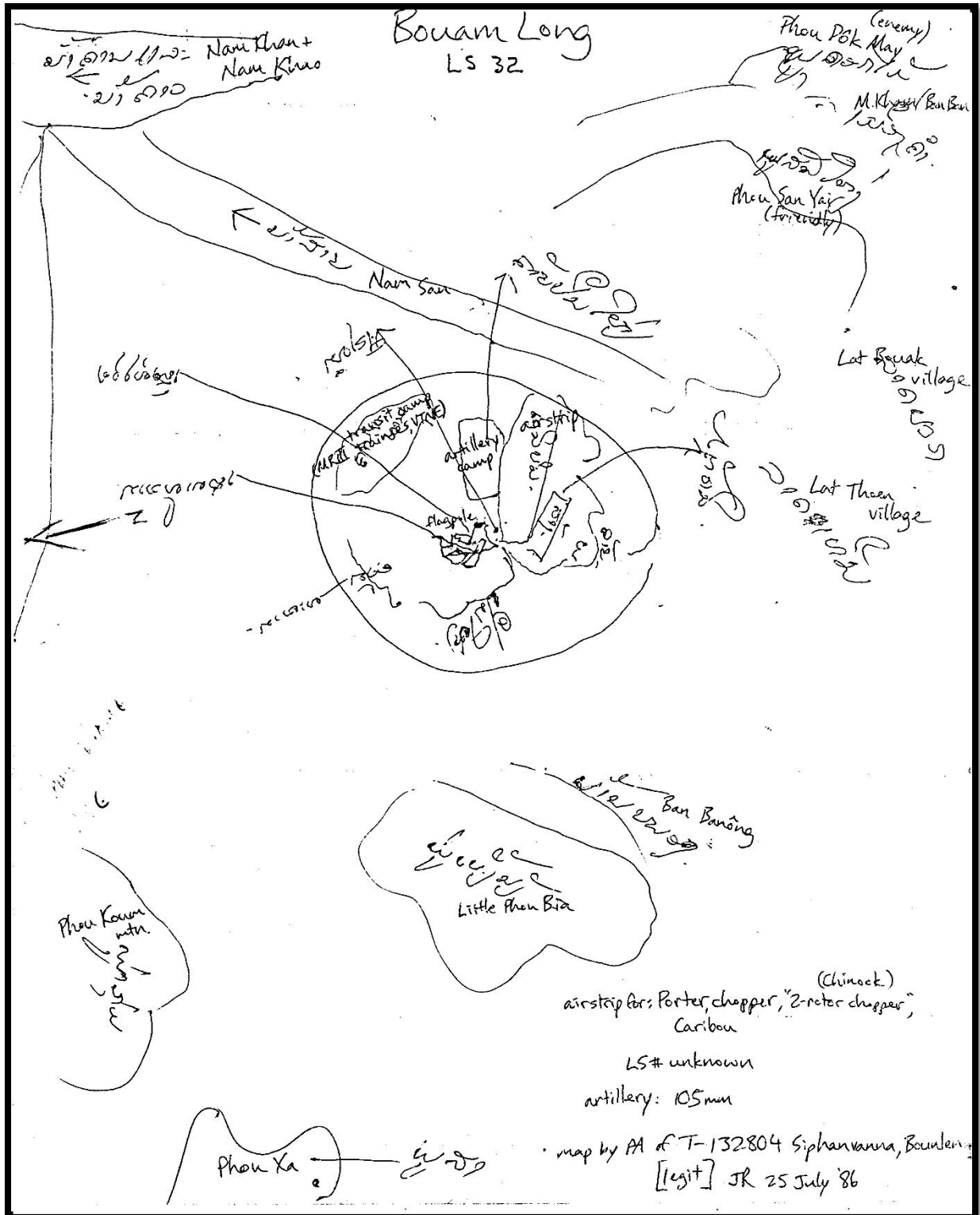
While Pearson launched to assess the weather and assume a radio platform, we consumed our boiled eggs, sandwiches, cookies, and milk, and mentally prepared for the mission. Jerry Daniels and another Customer showed the crew of Papa Hotel Echo to the large cave-like, dirt bunker carved into the eastern hillside a short distance upslope from the airstrip. Well positioned and almost impregnable, it was built to withstand everything but a direct hit by a bomb, or a large armor piercing artillery shell. Enhancing the ability to withstand a siege, the entrance to the shelter was fortified with dirt filled fifty-five-gallon drums and heaped up earthen berms. Overhead cover was equally impressive, with sheets of PSP covered with many layers of dirt and clay. Inside was very Spartan, with several immovable boulders. A few pieces of furniture consisting of a rough table and chairs sat in the center of the cave near a large cabinet containing communications equipment. A one-meter-wide trench had been prepared as a final defense line should enemy forces manage to penetrate friendly positions, and gain access to the bowl.<sup>12</sup> The effort to insulate the refuge against

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<sup>11</sup> Jim Pearson Emails, 04/30/98/ 05/23/98, 05/02/98, 05/24/98. Briefings: Pearson rarely attended a Special Project briefing with rotary wing pilots. Normally, Customers just took him to the side and informed him what was expected. He believed they thought he was psychic and knew exactly what was expected of him. Buddy Rogers could not conceive of any plan that he and his pilots could not fulfill; thus, the assigned night operations out of LS-32. Most fixed wing pilots could not even land at Bouam Long during the day, or even airdrop there with any degree of accuracy.

<sup>12</sup> EW Knight Emails, 12/28/00, 12/29/00. Wayne spent many hours in the bunker on several occasions.





Another rustic diagram of the Bouam Long complex recorded from memory by an indigenous type. Arrow is oriented northwest toward Phou Vieng (LS-06) and Phou Cum (LS-50).

outside aggression created a cold and damp environment inside. Aware of this, and mindful of crew "creature comfort" needs during the long night, Rogers had provided efficient, lightweight space blankets to minimize the chill and provide warmth. <sup>13</sup> As ordered in the briefing, it was Higgins and Knight's intention to remain in the bunker monitoring the radio for any hint of mission problems and requirement for their services.

We cranked up, switched on the electronic equipment, and established a final communications check amounting to two rapid clicks on the assigned VHF frequency setting. Somewhat muted by smoke and haze, twilight quickly morphed into darkness as we departed Bouam Long and turned right to an easterly direction. We climbed to cross Route-6 at a remote point where no fixed AAA guns had been observed on photographs. We followed Papa Hotel Bravo slightly stepped up so we could see the taped running lights that were only observable from above. <sup>14</sup> Zube determined that our LORAN set was tracking properly and that Scratch was on course. At the appropriate waypoint in space, I turned north and continued toward our objective. Keeping east of the distinctive Phou Pan mountain ranges, well into dark we crossed east of the Route-6/65 junction. Then we descended quickly and used the lengthy Phou Louang ridgeline to mask our presence from Route-65. It was a familiar route, one we had used before, but this time Kanach would be inserting the team further east at a point north of, and one determined easily assessable to the tap point. From the preselected landing zone, the team leader had assured

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<sup>13</sup> I used the olive drab space blanket as a comforter for several years during the coldest winter days in southeast Louisiana. Now it has disappeared.

<sup>14</sup> Running lights: The international identification and navigational light system is standard for both ships and aircraft. Green indicates starboard, or right side; red, port, or left side.

his handlers that his men could move south, scramble over the top of hill 3829, and move down the southern slopes to the valley floor and the periphery of the road. Then they would perform the work required to correct the tap problem, and return to the exfil point. The period from insertion to exfiltration was estimated to require eight hours at a time when most humans were asleep.

While Scratch continued toward his landing zone, I donned and switched on my night vision goggles, and continued east to create a diversion in the hills some distance from the actual insertion point. I faked a couple of low passes and arrived at a hover on one ridge. When it seemed to be taking too long for the team insertion, I circled and spotted Bravo's hover lights. It was difficult to tell exactly, but it appeared the point where Scratch was landing was a little north of the originally selected landing zone.

Unknown to me, a considerable problem had occurred in Scratch's cockpit. A la Mister Murphy, five miles from the target, Edwards, while reaching for the windscreen wiper switch to clear some light rain, had accidentally bumped the master radio switch to the off position, rendering the LORAN set inoperative. After restoring power, they milled around the area for about five minutes waiting for the LORAN set to reinitialize to a real-time present position and enable Hank to reprogram the proper coordinates.<sup>15</sup> All this was difficult to accomplish and

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<sup>15</sup> Hank Edwards Email, Hank considered this incident the most embarrassing moment of his flying career. As a result, he thought the error would result in the end of his Special Project involvement. However, Scratch, used to my problems with equipment in the cockpit, was not upset and Hank subsequently flew many times with Kanach. At the debriefing, and many times afterward, Edwards recommended that the LORAN set should not be wired to the master radio switch. No one took any action, but there never was a repeat incident.

had to be performed in the dark. As a result of the error, Scratch landed at a point that appeared to me from a distance to be somewhat north of the intended landing spot.<sup>16</sup>

The egress was uneventful. After landing and securing in the pitch black Bouam Long bowl, we repaired to the bunker to finish our box lunches and attempt to rest until called.

Jim Pearson preceded us to Site-32, and was in the process of refueling to resume his orbit and listen for the signal indicating the team leader's request for extraction. The first departure had been the first of three full fuel flights out of Bouam Long that evening carrying twenty armed Commando Raiders.<sup>17</sup> Each takeoff became an undertaking, expending a complete set of already frazzled nerves.

The first night landing required three hairy attempts because of launched flares that destroyed Pearson's night vision and created havoc between launches. This temporary blindness led to a procedure Jim conceived that eliminated the problem and allowed him to land with a modicum of safety. During future landings he arranged to have someone positioned at the far end of the runway to shine a flashlight toward the final approach path. Keeping the light in sight on downwind to base, he trimmed the plane and set the power. Then, maintaining speed, he turned

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<sup>16</sup> Unknown to us, offloading the team at a slightly different location presented unintended obstacles and consequences. It additionally confused the team and added a degree of difficulty and complexity to their job. Although well experienced and calm during periods of stress, their training had not included all the variables or delays the error would foster. This and some vagaries of Mother Nature, like rain that swelled the river they had to parallel, created other problems. As a result, it took much longer than anyone anticipated to move south toward the target. By the time they arrived anywhere close to the tap, it was close to sunrise. So, to preclude compromising the mission they hunkered down to wait for a more favorable time to proceed.

<sup>17</sup> Jim Pearson. Jim boarded the raiders at PS-44, flew to Udorn, and then to Bouam Long to refuel and join the helicopters as the airborne command ship.

ninety degrees to final at a sufficient altitude to observe the light. Similar to a modified ILS glide slope or carrier approach, at seventy knots, with a hundred percent RPM, and full flaps, he commenced a shallow descent until the light was no longer visible, indicating he was just below the rocky lip of the mountain, the main bowl, and the runway. Then he added a small amount of power to ascend until the light once again was visible. With this accomplished, a flat approach was continued into the bowl, where enough contrast in ground colors was discernable to almost detect the runway and effect a landing. Takeoffs with maximum fuel and a full complement of passengers was equally exciting. (Thirteen plus eighteen, ten plus forty-one night, eight landings.) <sup>18</sup>

With a long wait anticipated, I selected a place in the far upward corner of the bunker next to a set of rocks hoping for a couple hours of sleep. By design, it was away from the entrance and removed from others who might keep me awake by snoring. The mountains of Laos become very cold at any time of year. Bouam Long, equivalent to Phou Pha Thi in elevation, was no exception, and was the second highest base I ever RON. The space blanket generally helped curb incipient mountain cold, and I wished that I had had something comparable to it during my initial RON in Pop Buell's thatched warehouse at Sam Tong in 1962. True sleep was next to impossible. Nervous energy, anxiety over the second portion of the mission, and remaining at a location that recently had come under heavy artillery fire, failed to provide a restful medium for slumber. Moreover, my neurons fired for hours as I prayed for a little therapeutic sleep. I might have dozed a little later, but was relieved when the launch call came in the hours of early morning. The team leader had not contacted

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<sup>18</sup> Jim Pearson Emails, 04/30/98, 05/02/98, and FEPA log entry.



the Otter crew yet, but the folks at AB-1 wanted us to move into the area at the prearranged time in anticipation of an immediate extraction.

It was impossible for a normal human being to be fully alert at that early hour, and we were hoping this would be equally true of enemy forces in the Route-65 area. A piece of chewing gum and a scramble downhill to the Twinpacs in the cold, damp air helped clear my head somewhat. Once ensconced in my office chair the brain fog passed, adrenaline was doing its job, and I was ready to go.

The partial moon employed during phase one of the operation had already set, so, except for minor illumination from starlight, little light was available for NVG use. Zube confirmed that the LORAN was on line and the present position setting proved accurate. We arrived in the tap area without a problem. There still had been no contact with the team. To ensure radio silence, the team leader was equipped with a hand-held pulsating strobe light, a common survival issue for military pilots. The working end was covered with IR paper for proper identification by someone equipped with NVGs.

Disconcertingly, the team was not at the assigned landing zone. While we moved off to the north to effect diversions, Scratch conducted numerous passes without spotting a signal. Time over target lengthened. We were delayed far too long for either our safety or longevity. Finally, through the NVGs I saw Bravo's hover lights in the distance and assumed that Scratch was landing to conserve fuel and wait for further information or the teams' arrival.

After pinpointing his position, and further troubled by the lack of a definable horizon and an intensely dark night, I inadvertently strayed south over Route-65 toward adjacent hills located directly north of the valley. Except for possibly

alerting the folks below, I was not too concerned, for the action would tend to create a more comprehensive diversion by helping to mask Kanach's presence and overall intention.

I did not anticipate remaining in the location long, and when I turned 180 degrees right in order to re-cross the road, suddenly what had to be a 12.7mm gun or larger AAA weapon, commenced firing. The continuous tracer fire spit out of the barrel was dramatic and quite a fascinating sight. It was kind of like the "Mad Moment" sound and light show in the boonies of Quantico, Virginia, without the sound. It was spectacular, and I would have enjoyed it more had the fire not been directed at me. Through the miracle of NVGs, the discharge appeared like a huge, white water hose probing the inky black night air. Arcing like a hook at the apex of its slant range, eventually induced by gravity drop, the mostly extinguished rounds plunged toward the valley floor. Since NVGs were in short supply, Zube had not been issued a pair. Therefore, he did not witness the beauty of the light show, and could only view the discharge using the naked eye. I was not too worried, for the fire hose was never close enough to cause damage. Moreover, since we were completely blacked out, I was aware that the gunners were merely shooting at a perceived sound that could easily be distorted and reverberate in a narrow valley girdled by high mountains. After a few volleys, either out of ammunition or despairing of hitting anything, the firing ceased. For obvious reasons, we did not re-cross the road or activate the minigun.

It was getting late. With everyone alerted to our presence and despairing of retrieving the team that morning, we returned to Bouam Long to await further instructions from the Udorn office.

Jim Pearson landed one more time for fuel and launched in anticipation of team contact. It never came. Just after dawn,

with the second portion of the mission scrubbed, the Site-32 Customer received a message from AB-1 for the three helicopters at the site to RTB. It was a relatively new experience for me to be taxiing toward the Air America parking ramp early in the morning. We blocked in just before 0900 hours. (Ten plus forty, five plus forty night, four landings.)

During Rogers' debriefing, it was decided that following contact with the team, we would be alerted to conduct the extraction. In the meantime, we were sent home to rest, and relax with our families for diversion. Disturbing normal human biorhythms, restful sleep during the day, no matter how tired the individual, was never easy, but this was especially true in a hot, tropical climate, even with an air-conditioner.

Exacerbating the situation, I was uncomfortable with the fact that we seemed to be venturing into the same area too frequently, and the odds portended that we would eventually catch hell. Events of the past night had proven enemy capability to be formidable, even during early morning hours, when they should have been dreaming of bananas and sticky rice. Moreover, all the miniguns in the world would fail to help us should one of us be shot or forced down in the enemy's backyard. <sup>19</sup>

Jim Pearson's crew eventually established a brief contact with the tap team late on the 13th. Exhausted from their extended journey, the men were resting and hiding from enemy

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<sup>19</sup> During the Special Project period, I was aware that Father Luke Bouchard, referred to as "The Walking Priest of Laos," for traveling vast distances to spread his message, had lived and worked extensively in Sam Neua Province during the early 1960s. Therefore, without divulging details of our mission, I inquired about our chances if we should be forced down in the province. Luke indicated that when he was chased out of Sam Neua town, he and other priests had converted 5,000 tribal types to Christianity. He felt that the people still living there would likely be counted on to help us. This knowledge was reassuring, but still an unknown, as the communists had controlled the province for many years and the people would probably be loath to jeopardize their status by helping us.

patrol activity triggered by our excessive time in the area. Wiretap repair had not yet been accomplished and was planned during cover of night on the 14th. Further contact would be made by the team leader when the job was completed.

With this knowledge, the same Twinpac mission crews checked in Wednesday morning at 1100 hours. A third helicopter and crew were not included. Pending successful resolution of the existing problem, team retrieval was tentatively scheduled for around midnight. If clear signals were recorded, the ADR would be delivered the following night.

Following a briefing in Rogers' office relating to phase two--the ADR placement--we repaired to the "Skunk Works" to study latest black and white aerial photos of a prominent tree on top of Phou Nia (VH395440, bench mark 4,131 feet) where the techs wanted us to plant the ADR. The isolated tree, which soon became humorously known among crews as the "**only tree in Laos**," displayed a broad canopy with light colored leaves. The target was on a line of sight, about two and a half miles south-southeast from the installed telephone tap. Showing us mathematical calculations and map overlays, the technicians were deadly serious as to positioning the ADR in this particular tree. Ludicrous as it sounded, the tall tree was considered the only suitable platform in the area affording a proper alignment to the tap. Moreover, the antenna had to be virtually invisible from the ground and from Soviet satellites that circled every twenty-four hours. With all this in mind, we spent considerable time studying past and present photos from every possible angle using stereographic devices. <sup>20</sup>

Scratch continued to be slated for the primary delivery role, but as a back-up crew who might be called on at any time

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<sup>20</sup> EW Knight Email, 12/29/00.

to perform the job, we were equally involved in the latest intelligence.

### **THE ADR**

A couple of tech geeks were inspecting an actual Airborne Deployable Relay in the laboratory, and briefed us about some of the relay's aspects.<sup>21</sup> This particular lightweight aluminum, collapsible ADR was conceived and then developed in a Langley laboratory. It was designed to be attached to the rescue hoist mechanism and carried flat against the side of a Twinpac. Measuring about three meters wide when deployed, the relay was somewhat larger and considered more rugged than the one delivered by the H-500P crew in the Vinh, North Vietnam area. Manufactured as one of a kind item, it was quite expensive--60,000 dollars--that did not include shipping expenses from the United States. I was informed by a handler that solar panels lining the legs cost 5,000 dollars per square foot.

Installation was explained to us: While the pilot hovered low over the tree canopy, the Flight Mechanic (S) activated chemical light strips on top of the ADR for nighttime orientation, and then, using the rescue hoist, lowered the green device toward the canopy. Then a set of small explosive charges was activated to blow the four legs outward to establish a flat configuration so that the device could be lowered into the canopy where mesh netting would tangle in the branches, and the three-meter-long legs would theoretically stabilize the ADR in a level position. The apparatus was thoroughly tested in the States, where engineers were satisfied with the results.

So far, we had only deployed a wooden ADR mock-up at PS-44. Without all the bells and whistles and complexity of an actual

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<sup>21</sup> ADR: This device was also called a solar powered spider relay.

deployment, or practicing with an actual item, training was relatively unrealistic, but did provide some rudimentary delivery practice techniques. It required crew coordination, while hovering over a tree in the dark wearing night vision goggles.

The working portion of the ADR was more complex, and although nice to know, was not necessary for us to completely understand. Beside the lightweight aluminum frame, it basically consisted of an omni-directional receiver and transmitter mounted on a gooseneck like device. Other equipment included wiring to components and a battery to store solar energy, and ensure power for cloudy days. The entire unit was well camouflaged and difficult to detect in a tree. I asked how long the ADR would be expected to function once deployed, and received a non-committal to-be-announced (TBA).

Important measures had to be taken to ensure reliable signals. Before deploying the ADR in the tree canopy, the helicopter had to be correctly aligned on a pre-planned northerly direction toward the tap, so the Flight Mechanics could point and deploy the device in a gross direction and await information as to how much to turn the device. Then, as electrical impulses were received from the ADR, the Otter pilot, usually Jim Pearson, called out numbers relayed to him by an Agency technician, who was monitoring an oscilloscope from the rear of the plane. A spike on the green screen indicated not only signal strength, but also the direction of transmission, with five constituting optimum signal strength. Jim merely flew the plane, maneuvered as indicated, and relayed the numbers to the helicopter pilot. For example: three, four, five, five-five-five. Bingo. Upon hearing a string of solid fives, the mechanics would lower the ADR into the center of the tree and separate the unit from the hoist. It ostensibly appeared to be a

straightforward process. This may have been the case during optimum conditions, but later developments revealed that the operation certainly was not as uncomplicated during field conditions.<sup>22</sup>

It required two hours and twenty-five minutes to arrive at the Bouam Long site nonstop. Jim Pearson and Pete Parker were again supporting us with 74M. They would receive communication from the tap team leader, and relay the launch signal to the Site-32 Customer. (Seven plus thirty-seven, five plus fifty-five night, five landings.) Until that time, we would repeat our cold, anxious wait in the bunker.

Finally, with the moon positioned in the exact location for optimum illumination and with the team anxious to depart, we prepared to make the sixty-five-mile, forty-five-minute flight to the area. Still groggy from attempted sleep, I hastily began cranking the number one power section. In the process, the engine temperature needle began accelerating at an alarming rate, so I immediately snapped the throttle to the idle cutoff position and momentarily continued motoring to cool the engine. As it appeared to be only a transient overtemp, I was not overly concerned and began starting the number two section, while hoping the first section would quickly cool. Scratch's rotor blades were already turning, and as we were constrained from communicating by the need for radio silence, I could not hesitate and began cranking number one. Before I was ready to launch, Scratch was already taxiing toward the end of the runway, and departed into the inky void. It was my obligation as SAR ship to keep up with him. After Zube switched all the electrical equipment on line, I began a running takeoff to

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<sup>22</sup> Hank Edwards Email.

Jim Pearson Email.

EW Knight Emails, 12/28/00, 12/29/00. Wayne's description of the ADR.

minimize the dust created by our churning rotors that might lead to a spatial disorientation. Once airborne, smoke and haze did not appear to be a problem.

Ascending to the east, I searched for Scratch, but had trouble identifying him because of overhead stars twinkling like position lights. It was no great problem, for we would continue to track toward the target, and join in the extraction area.

This time the team was positioned in the right place at the right time. After receiving a strobe signal, Scratch landed and loaded the men. Leaving the Otter crew to ascertain if the tap was sending strong signals (the team leader and his helper had installed one insulator), we headed for Udorn.

With assistance of vectors provided by Brigham Control, we dodged thunderstorms and arrived after 0200 hours. (Seven plus forty, five plus forty-five night, four landings.) Both Knight and Rogers were still in the office. They had been monitoring mission progress from the radio room, and Buddy was quite excited by the stream of phone conversations received and recorded by the monitoring devices. He now had a rousing success to crow about to his Langley superiors. However, despite his euphoria, there was little time to waste. Washington wanted twenty-four-hour monitoring of the phone line to obtain information regarding North Vietnamese intentions in upper Military Region Two, and the only way to accomplish this was through the wiretap relay system. <sup>23</sup>

Fatigued, and generally shunning celebratory alcohol, we left for home in Company transportation satisfied and confident

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<sup>23</sup> Knight Email. Wayne generally knew the object of our efforts. He was privy to a few ultimate results, usually when the mission was a resounding success. He was in the AB-1 commo room listening to first transmissions received over the Sam Neua tap. The first conversations intercepted were boring, just a couple of radio operator's small talk.



that everything was in place for the mission's second phase-the ADR deployment.

### **ONE OF MANY ATTEMPTS**

We were back at the airfield by 1215 hours. My crew and I were assigned Papa Hotel Bravo. After briefing, checking equipment, and retrieving food, the glasses case, the ADR, and the minigun, we were ready to launch. Satisfied that everything was in place and working properly, we all made our way to Bouam Long. Since the ADR was strapped tight against the right fuselage, and created considerable drag, Scratch had to proceed at a slower pace than usual. The western route paralleled the Nam Khan, a broad tributary that emptied many miles to the north into the Mekong River at Luang Prabang. Since the river was known to support enemy traffic, about halfway to our turning point at Phou Vieng, well past Phou So, I cleared Bill Long hot to test fire the minigun toward the river. It was reassuring to hear the six-barrel's throaty discharge, and I reveled in the fact that perhaps this spoiled someone's evening below.

At a prearranged time, we made our way east and then north as a flight of two, so as to arrive at Phou Nia just prior to dark. If all went well this time, honored techniques would eliminate navigation errors and minimize the degree of difficulty and usage of NVG for ADR deployment, and better ensure success.

Twin Otter Captains Pearson and Parker were already airborne in 868, a plane that was equipped with an oscilloscope and an Agency technician to interpret the signals prior to final deployment of the ADR. (Five plus twenty-seven, three plus forty-four night, four landings.)

Before arriving at Phou Nia, we descended below the long mountain range ahead of us to mask our sound and presence from

the Route-65 valley. This cautionary procedure posed a downside, for we had to cross Route-641, a narrow, wooded secondary trail one ridge south of Phou Nia, at a perpendicular angle to minimize exposure. <sup>24</sup> There was some danger and a calculated risk involved in cruising at a lower altitude. We might receive fire from scattered villages dotting the deep ravines and narrow valleys. But like most people dependent on agricultural economies, after supper farmers retired early. Although few lights were visible on the ground, I alerted Long to stand by the minigun as a deterrent to any potential duck hunters.

From distance and altitude, we could easily see Phou Nia's prominent peak above the surrounding terrain. As we neared our goal, we could also observe fog forming on the lower slopes, and quickly rising toward the mountain top. Before Scratch was in position to commence the installation, clouds and fog had completely obscured our work area. During the Vinh missions, the H-500P crew had encountered similar conditions both near Nape Pass at the border and inside North Vietnam, but at different hours. This setback caused me to speculate if the entire mountain chain near the border was subject to identical adverse weather patterns. Since the loss of the Na Khang (LS-36) base, we had maintained no weather stations in the upper Military Region Two area, so a narrow dew point spread leading to fog formation (generally three degrees and calm winds) was difficult to predict. One could only rely on past experience in the mountains and the Otter crew for gross PIREPS.

We returned to Site-32 to await instructions that included another attempt later in the evening. The second endeavor

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<sup>24</sup> Crossing an enemy artery using this method and avoiding paralleling a LOC was the logical and accepted procedure either on the ground or in the air.

produced no better result. Weather was worse. Fog and low clouds inundated the entire deployment area, so, anticipating no change in deteriorating conditions, we aborted the mission and headed for home. Fatigued and disgusted at failing to achieve our objective, we arrived at 2300 hours, (Seven plus thirty, five plus forty night, four landings.)

Although always ready to launch, we stood down the next three days to allow the area to cool off and await improved weather conditions.

On the morning of the 19<sup>th</sup>, at 1115, we gathered at the airfield for the latest mission information. Rogers always pushed for an after dark insertion, but Scratch still insisted that we continue to attempt a last light operation when success was more likely.

Pearson and Parker ventured north early in Twin Otter 868 to monitor tap signals and assess the weather. As usual, they carried a full complement of "loaded for bear" Commando Raiders. (Six plus fifty-three, three four night, four landings.) <sup>25</sup>

All went well until we approached the target and found low clouds covering the area. Instead of reversing course for Bouam Long, as we usually had in the past, Scratch elected to loiter and search for a hole and a way underneath the cloud layer. Near dark, he discovered a sizeable hole and descended. After he disappeared, deciding that I could be of no use to him on top, I started down.

Murphy never takes a day off when aviators are having fun. Deep in "Indian Country," with weather an issue, and the cloak of darkness beginning to envelop us, the unthinkable happened. Halfway into the hole, the number two power section suddenly dropped off the line. Fortunately, when the emergency occurred,

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<sup>25</sup> Jim Pearson FEPA logbook.

we were at a low power setting without significant payload, so even if number one rose to maximum power there was little danger of overtemping the engine.

My disbelief was short lived. Concerned with our survival, as I had taught and practiced with others and myself many times during training sessions, I identified the malfunctioning power section, retarded the number two throttle to flight idle, and switched to the correct manual fuel control mode. Then I slowly rolled the throttle on, using the tachometer needle to match RPM and power settings to the other engine. Closely monitoring NF/NR needles on the tachometer gage, keeping them in synchronization with small amounts of number two throttle manipulations, and with two engines again producing equal power, I slowly climbed and returned to orbit a little south and just above the clouds.

In addition to directing most of my attention to keeping the NF/NR needles married, I was further concerned, for it would be extremely difficult to help Scratch if something happened to him. Therefore, I broke radio silence and briefly apprised him of my problem. I received a disgusted (likely over our bad luck), noncommittal answer as if he did not believe what had happened. Kanach indicated that he would continue to look underneath for an opportunity to complete the job. He remained underneath for what seemed like an inordinately long time while we orbited. Throughout the ordeal, Dan Zube appeared calm.

Suddenly, without warning, Scratch popped through the cloud layer dangerously close to our position and began heading for Site-32. Lacking our mechanical concerns, his ship was much faster and he was soon out of sight. Zube, always a reliable copilot, navigated us to the valley just north of Bouam Long.

No moonlight was available, so I thought landing Bravo might present a challenge. The bowl was a pitch-black morass, no visible horizon or contrasting land masses to reference the

landing strip. With a requirement to monitor the tachometer, I could not use the NVG device.

One running light from Scratch's ship was dimly visible in the parking area. Therefore, using this visual cue for basic orientation, I established a sixty knot long, shallow final approach to what I estimated was the runway's location, for a running landing. Arriving over the lip of the bowl, on short final, while fixated on the nearly invisible strip, I ceased closely monitoring the instruments. This resulted in a potentially costly mistake. The manual fuel control mode was a very sensitive system. Unless the manual feature using the throttle twist grip was constantly adjusted to about the same setting (plus or minus five percent) as the automatic fuel control feature of the other section, the manual power section would drop off the line to idle. This is exactly what happened.

As I was unable to properly divide my attention from the cockpit tachometer to the proposed landing site outside, the number two engine section was no longer producing power. Since we were still airborne, I had no time or inclination to recover it. Continuing the final approach on one barrel proved no problem. With a slight addition of power, it was easy to maintain sufficient altitude and airspeed to clear the lip at the approach end of the runway, and conduct a smooth run-on landing. We had made it, a tribute to men, machines, and training.

After securing in the fuel pit, using flashlights, Long, Kennedy, and Lowe checked the engine compartment for an answer to our problem. They soon discovered that a number two engine steel flex P3 airline, clamped to the right horizontal rail supporting the power section, had shifted from its brackets. Lying close against the steel rail, over time, ensuing vibrations had chaffed a hole in the line. Without air pressure

properly flowing into fuel control sensors, the engine could not operate in the automatic mode. Apparently, the hole was concealed inboard next to the rail, invisible to a normal inspection. I was reminded of the old aviator's adage: "Hours and hours of boredom..."<sup>26</sup>

Once the problem was identified, the Otter crew was dispatched to Udorn to obtain another P3 line. Upon 868's return, the new line was installed, the engine tested, and we returned home at 2300 hours. (Seven plus five, three plus fifty-five night, four landings.)<sup>27</sup> Following a short debriefing, we journeyed to the house with the knowledge that another deployment attempt was scheduled for the next day.

*"I have been working a lot recently doing some new work. It is very demanding.*

*No one knows what will happen over here but there are no illusions as the North's are moving war supplies into position for another go. The whole thing doesn't look good. Once we leave the way is open to them. This could be a hundred-year war. Seriously, from the way I look at it this potentially is a third world war shaping up right in Southeast Asia.*

*Home leave starts 1 July with probably a seven-day STO preceding this...we should be home around the 28th of June. Workloads may change this...We will have to be back to work 15 August..."*

Letter Home, 03/20/73.

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<sup>26</sup> This was the second such emergency I had experienced in the Bouam Long area from perforated stainless-steel flex lines. During July 1969, while on approach to the strip in a Bell 204, my hydraulic boost system had failed as a result of loss of fluid from a chaffed flex line located in the transmission tunnel. Again, it was in a concealed area difficult to inspect.

<sup>27</sup> EW Knight Email, 12/28/00. Wayne recalled that it was an exciting night for me, and that parts were taken to Bouam Long by the Twotter crew.

My prognostications might have been largely based on scuttlebutt or media speculation, but more likely the fact that President Nixon was strongly hinting the U.S. might intervene again to prevent communist violations of the ceasefire. Prior to the Paris signing, he had assured President Thieu that the U.S. would respond with force should North Vietnam violate the settlement. In addition, Henry Kissinger was alarmed by the increase of men and materiel from the North into South Vietnam. He recommended that the U.S. resume bombing the Trail system and the Demilitarized Zone. <sup>28</sup>

Tuesday morning, after completing my letter home, the B-bus driver arrived. Once I posted the letter, I gathered my gear and placed it in Papa Hotel Bravo while Bill Long conducted a preflight. Then I accompanied Scratch to the White House for information relating to the latest known situation in Sam Neua, the regional weather forecast, and Wally's anticipated illumination report.

While studying latest aerial photos, a photo interpreter showed us empty AAA gun pits just to the west of Phou Nia. Perhaps left over from the road bombing era, I assumed they had been there all along, but wondered why they had not been noted, or mentioned to us previously. Still, I appreciated the individual informing us of their presence. The revelation somewhat helped to restore my confidence in the unit's veracity, for since the Captain Henthorn Grail incident in the Thakhet area, I had only half believed what was said. In fact, I was not completely convinced that we were provided a hundred percent of the straight scoop. Although a little paranoid, this was logical, for these guys wanted the job completed, and preferred not to unduly alarm us. Moreover, because we had penetrated the

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<sup>28</sup> John Bowman *Almanac*.  
Phillip Davidson, *Vietnam at War*.

area many times, and from the recent hosing I encountered during the middle of the night, despite our precautions, I was well aware that the enemy was quite alert and capable of fairly quick reactions.

Because of the "new" information, Buddy thought it best that we conduct a late-night insertion for a safer measure of cover and concealment. Scratch, who was going on home leave soon, still believed our best chance for success included a last light insertion.

Attesting to AB-1's burning desire for a workable relay system, in addition to the minigun, we were fitted with an extra ADR. If for some reason Scratch could not perform the job, we would be assigned to make the attempt. I had practiced the ADR deployment, but not extensively, or under the same conditions, or to the extent as Kanach.

In the gathering darkness, while passing the former Meo-controlled position at Phou Pha Louom (LS-220), red tracers from a single 12.7mm gun ineffectively stroked the sky. I cleared Bill Long hot, and after a single burst toward the offending source, the gun jammed. Intended to both suppress and discourage further enemy fire, this was surprising and disappointing, for the gun had worked fine during an en route test firing. Assuming people on the ground were saying, "*Here they come again,*" I wondered if they had communications capability to radio ahead to warn their brothers in the Route-65 valley of our presence and presumed flight path. Thoroughly checked and cleared by a weapons specialist, the minigun problem and future jams were inexplicable. Moreover, the issue stimulated humor that stated, "*The weapon did not enjoy black air.*" Our frustration leading to



joking sometimes extended to "accidentally" ejecting it out the door.<sup>29</sup>

The early attempt was soon aborted because of fog and low clouds, and a desire not to tip our hand. As pre-briefed, we recovered at Bouam Long to await further instructions. We were told to camp out in the nasty, damp womb of the Customer's bunker for word to launch. This would depend on Pearson and Parker's weather observations from 868. After resting a little,

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29 EW Knight Email, 01/02/01 (2), 01/03/01. Vice President of the Udorn Maintenance Department, Jack Forney, called Wayne one day complaining that recoil from the minigun was damaging the floor structure of the S-58T's. Knight assumed that one of the Flight Mechanics must have leaked information to Jack that a minigun was being carried on our missions. Knight initially played dumb and denied the weapon's existence. He was appalled that Forney, someone who had no need to know, actually had knowledge of the gun's existence. Moreover, he was not convinced that any damage was caused by the gun. It was firmly mounted on a stout plywood board, which in turn rested on three-quarter-inch plywood decking. In addition, the gun was not fired often from the helicopter; only testing and an occasional suppressive burst. There actually was no damage to the floor caused by the gun. Perhaps Jack was worried about a potential danger. Butting heads over incidents/accidents and procedures over the years, Wayne was never particularly enamored with Jack Forney or his methods. He also considered that Jack may have been miffed at being left out of the Special Project loop.

Installed in the early days of the Madriver operation, with intentions to prevent damage to the decking, the varnished plywood flooring was an excellent addition. However, the fix was not good enough to prevent some floor compression when full fuel or water drums were tipped over prior to being hooked up and hoisted to the ground. A modification of a flip-up protector for the lip of the cabin door frame was added to minimize the problem. This tended to work well, but more and more weight contributed to an already too heavy airframe.

Author Note: It was obvious that Jack Forney was not overly impressed with our Special Project maintenance requirements; certainly not the "Gold Plated" aspect. On at least one occasion on the flight line, he bellowed about our excessive maintenance requirements.

In all fairness, after I got to know Jack a little better, I realized that much of his diatribes was merely blustering. My knowing his friend Jim Moore helped our relationship. Also, his wife Judy knew Tuie well through the American Wives Club. Having said this, I still believe Forney was never particularly fond of pilots. Perhaps he was a bit jealous of our exalted status?

early in the morning we heard Pearson landing for fuel. He indicated that the weather appeared to be improving and the people at AB-1 wanted us to attempt another insertion.

After Jim departed, we launched for Phou Nia. Scratch hovered over "the only tree in Laos." Then, after receiving steady fives from 868, with the help of Kennedy and Low, he was able to align and install the ADR. It appeared that after several attempts, phase two was finally complete, and I was happy to be leaving the increasingly dangerous area.

Wayne Knight was in the AB-1 radio room monitoring our progress. There was a lot of celebrating when the Twotter crew relayed word of the successful ADR alignment. Since it would be a couple of hours before the aircraft arrived at Udorn, Knight elected to remain and join in the fun.

After more than seventeen hours of duty time, we blocked in at 0445. (Eight plus forty, five plus forty-two night, five landings.) There was still a lot of enthusiasm in Buddy Roger's office, and in keeping with successful missions, he opened his well-stocked booze locker for libations and cigars. But celebrations were short lived, for over the next two days we were informed that the ADR was not relaying the expected signals. Some "Skunk Works" people theorized that the unit had been incorrectly installed by 180 degrees. Others speculated that the ADR had shifted out of alignment. Rotor wash, wind, broken branches might have shifted the ADR, causing degradation of the signal. Regardless of the cause, it was necessary to inspect and or reorient the ADR. <sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Jim Pearson FEPA logbook flights for 03/20/72.

Bill Long Email.

EW Knight Email, 12/28/00. *"There was a lot of celebrating when the Twotter relayed the successful alignment. I would not have missed the debrief for anything. Buddy broke out his finest booze and cigars."*

## **WASHINGTON QUANDARY**

Large enemy movements south over the DMZ and the Ho Chi Minh Trail system was well documented by various sources. Naturally, there was considerable consternation and uncertainty in the Nixon Administration about how to deal with the situation without disrupting and perhaps abrogating the hard-fought ceasefire agreement. Therefore, after high level deliberation between the Washington Special Action Group (WSAG) movers and shakers, in response to North Vietnamese infiltration and logistics activity in the south, Henry Kissinger forwarded a lengthy message to his boss, President Nixon, outlining the problem and solutions:

*"The North Vietnamese are continuing their heavy rate of personnel infiltration and logistics movements through Southern Laos into Cambodia and South Vietnam. These actions are in clear violation of both the letter and spirit of the January 27 Agreement. We cannot say for sure precisely what their motivation may be...*

*They may believe that we won't react while they still hold a large number of our POWs, and thus they are free for the next three weeks to continue a major replacement and resupply operation to position themselves and keep their options open for the future.*

*They may be simply testing us to see how far they can go because they have not yet made up their minds on whether to pursue their objectives politically or revert to military actions...*

*They may have decided to resume offensive action, possibly in the fall.* <sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Author Note: It very well could have involved all three items.

*Whatever their motivations, their actions are a clear challenge. We have protested these actions in our private channel and demanded an explanation of them and their cessation. We have given the North Vietnamese a clear signal that they cannot continue this course with impunity, but they have not responded and we have seen no evidence of a cessation.*

*The issue is whether and how we should respond and if we are to do so, the timing of our response.*

*On the diplomatic side, efforts through the four-Party Joint Military Commission and the ICCS would be largely unavailing. Neither of these bodies has been able up to now to successfully undertake on a timely basis investigations of major violations...<sup>32</sup>*

*On the military side, the North Vietnamese are exposed both in the trail area of the Laotian Panhandle and in the northern reaches of South Vietnam's MR-1. In both areas they are operating in daylight and the traffic is so heavy as to be congested. They clearly are taking advantage of the fact that all air action against them has ceased. A series of heavy strikes over a 2 or 3 day period in either of these areas would be very costly to them in both personnel and material...*

*...a strike against the trail complex in Southern Laos would have the most immediate effect with the least risk. We have precedent of our earlier B-52 attack in Laos [at Paksong on the Bolovens Plateau] just after the Laos ceasefire. Such a strike would, by its very surprise, have a devastating effect...*

*It would signify clearly that we will not tolerate continued violations and will react decisively to them...If they now believe that we may not react and we fail to do so, we will*

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<sup>32</sup> Author Note: The ICC was a glaring joke--eyewash for imprudent politicians. From the time of the 1954 Geneva Agreement, the organization had achieved little constructive, particularly in Laos.

*encourage increasing and even more blatant violations. If we react we will demonstrate the costs which they must expect to bear if they [nullify] the Agreement. It will help to make clear once again that they have a stake in keeping the Agreement.*

*The argument against taking this step will be seen as an evident breakdown of the ceasefire and perhaps of the Agreement itself. There will be recriminations. But in my judgment if we do not react, the Agreement may well fall down precisely because we did not... <sup>33</sup>*

### **INTO THE PANHANDLE**

Since Chinooks were well suited to deliver large numbers of troops under the cover of night, and U.S. military assets were no longer available for missions from Savannakhet road watch training bases, the Agency was constantly searching for opportunities to introduce Air America CH-47s into the Special Project equation. Projected missions into the eastern Panhandle mainly focused on supplementing S-58T intelligence gathering efforts in the Sam Neua Province area to discover enemy movement and intentions following the Lao ceasefire agreement.

This endeavor was highlighted in an early March Washington dialogue:

*"CIA has proposed some lightly armed reconnaissance teams to be infiltrated into several areas in Laos to monitor North Vietnamese Army withdrawals from Laos and the activities on key infiltration/exfiltration routes between North and South Vietnam and Laos. They would work against the most frequently used resupply routes through Laos. They would be instructed to avoid*

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<sup>33</sup> FRUS, #29, 03/14/73, Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon. Response to continued North Vietnamese infiltration and logistics activity in the south, Washington.

*contact with enemy forces. They would be inserted by Air America helicopters (without escort) and would not be resupplied while in the operational area. They would operate, for example in the Mugia Pass area and in other such key infiltration areas.*

*We believe this would give us the kind of information about NVA activity that we really need and without which our intelligence can only be tenuous based on COMINT and [Igloo White] sensors. We believe the operation will be of relatively low risk and has a potential for considerable gain.”* <sup>34</sup>

Not to be outdone by AB-1's efforts in upper Military Region Two, the Savannakhet Chief of Station unit proposed an intelligence gathering foray into the Mugia Pass area of the Panhandle to ascertain and possibly disrupt purported enemy activity along the Trail system. <sup>35</sup>

By 15 March, Henry Kissinger received hard evidence of enemy movement. Therefore, he approved Savannakhet COS recommendation for road watch team penetration in the Panhandle. Preceding such action, he delivered a message to Ambassador Godley:

*“As you will have seen from intelligence reports, there continues to be a disturbingly high level of movement of men and equipment on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. All evidence indicates that this movement is following the patterns established prior to the Agreement on Vietnam and that distribution is being made to communist units in Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam.*

*This traffic is in clear violation of Articles 7 and 20 of the Vietnam Agreement, as well as contrary to the general spirit of the Vientiane 1973 Agreement. We have registered our vigorous*

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<sup>34</sup> FRUS, #26, 03/07/73, Memorandum from John Holdridge and Richard Kennedy of the National Security Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Reconnaissance Teams to Verify North Vietnamese Troop Withdrawals, Washington.

<sup>35</sup> Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 491.

*objections through confidential communications with Hanoi and have publicly stated our concern. If there is to be any prospect for a serious implementation of the agreements which the communists have undertaken, we clearly cannot tolerate the continuation of these violations.*

*We [the President et. al.] are currently considering executing some air strikes against traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, probably over a two-day period, within the next seven to ten days. We would plan to hit vehicles, supply depots, and transit points, all of them on Lao territory.*

*We consider it important that Souvanna should be aware of the action we contemplate, although we do not wish our ability to execute these strikes to be contingent upon his request, and we would welcome such a request if he is prepared to make it.*

*On the other hand, if he takes his traditional position that the [HCMT] is a [NVN]-United States affair which is beyond his control, we would at very least wish him to express his approval of our action, even if he declines to make a specific request for it.*

*You should, therefore, approach Souvanna as a matter of urgency, share with him some of our intelligence indicators, advise him of our contingency thinking, and obtain his concurrence in our execution of these air strikes if events prove them necessary. His request for them would be welcome. At very least, public expression of his acquiescence is wanted.”<sup>36</sup>*

*Consuming a large number of assets and considerable effort, Panhandle road watch activity along the Trails was big business*

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<sup>36</sup> FRUS #30, 03/15/73, Backchannel Message from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to the Ambassador to Laos (Godley), Washington.

Godley met with the Lao Prime Minister the same day. Souvanna indicated that he would publicly agree to U.S. action. However, the Ambassador was not overly confident of this.

from the mid-60s on in order to generate intelligence and develop targets for air strikes. Constantly evolving, real time observation that required often laborious radio relay to aircraft or the Savannakhet office initially resulted in a slow strike response time. For this reason, by the time that strikes were effected, the objects of the strikes had often moved on.

This slow and inept form of field reporting had resulted in development of the HARK device, a light, hand-held radio type unit. This enabled the electronic relay of instant information to airborne ships which, in turn, provided timely contact to central control facilities, for more rapid analysis of data and disposition. Delays were still frustrating, but better coordination eventually reduced responses to minutes from previously hour-long reaction time. Team reporting was not always reliable and often fabricated. Therefore, to bypass the human element, the Igloo White program was introduced. This consisted of camouflaged electronic sensors liberally air-dropped along the Trail system to tally human and vehicular traffic. Like any new program, there were glitches to overcome. After initial problems with battery life and sensing capability, these devices were eventually considered more reliable, efficient, and cost effective than employing road watch teams.

Consequently, the HARK program was terminated and road watch teams were greatly reduced. Moreover, attrition of USAF men and machines (CH-3, HH-53 helicopters, and A-1E escort planes) and a wind down in the war contributed to a reduced, and then a lack of former assets to deliver and retrieve teams from forward positions. Also, a huge number of targets overwhelmed the USAF, that could not respond to all the reports.

Don Courtney, a former Case Officer at LS-235 was charged to deploy two road watch teams about this time. Since the entire Panhandle had once been littered with intelligence gathering



teams, experienced men were not difficult to find. As a one-shot deployment, the exercise was implemented on a trial basis to assess if it was feasible to revive road watch operations. Since there had been previous fabrications in reporting observations, teams carried concealed beacons that revealed where the men ventured. Overall, reporting was considered meager. <sup>37</sup>

Complementing Courtney's task, a road watch mission to Mugia was scheduled for a Chinook crew. Preparing to insert four teams into the Panhandle area, Senior Captains Wayne Knight, Lloyd Higgins, and Ed Reid conducted special night training in 816016 on the 21st. This consisted of three hours and ten minutes of LORAN navigation, crew coordination, and rough area landings using NVGs in and around the Phou Pan hills west of Udorn.

The following day, Wayne and Bill Hutchison conducted FCFs on 816016 to ensure that LORAN and other mission equipment was working properly.

Late Friday afternoon, after loading two teams of forty men at Udorn, PIC Knight and Reid headed southeast for a one-hour plus trip toward Mugia Pass. Bill Hutchison conducted LORAN navigation from the foldable jump seat located in the narrow entrance to the cockpit. Two Flight Mechanics rounded out the crew. They were accompanied by a S-58T flown by Captain Scratch Kanach, et al. and supported by Twin Otter 74M crew Pearson, Olson, and Deeble.

At last light, twenty-four miles south of Mugia, using NVGs, they landed in a lengthy, sloping pasture located in a river valley near the village of Ban Kang. The mobile Yankee landing zone was located approximately four miles west of, and accessible to Route-911/23. Following an incident free night

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<sup>37</sup> Don Courtney Email, 05/11/17.

insertion, the crews recovered at Udorn. (Five plus five, three plus thirty night.) <sup>38</sup>

### **CEASEFIRE DEVELOPMENTS**

Nothing is ever easy in the convoluted political world of contesting parties. This was particularly the case in 1973 Laos.

*"The two sides have postponed the formation of a new coalition government beyond the deadline of 23 March set by last month's peace agreement.*

*The senior communist negotiators left Vientiane yesterday for new strategy sessions at their headquarters near Sam Neua [likely located in a cave complex at Ban Nakay Neua, the terminus of the telephone line we tapped]. The absence of Chief Pathet Lao negotiator Phoumi Vongvichit has been the major obstacle to progress. Other communist envoys have not been empowered to undertake discussion on the composition of a new government.*

*Despite the elapsed deadline, the agreement signed last month remains in effect, and there is no sign that either side is preparing to resume combat. A government press release indicates that negotiations will resume next week and holds out the possibility that agreement on a new government could quickly follow.*

*One effect of the delay is to set back the timetable for the withdrawal of foreign troops and the release of prisoners.*

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<sup>38</sup> EW Knight Emails, 12/29/00, 05/12/17, 05/16/17. Wayne used NVG devices on all Chinook Special Project missions. No hostile activity was encountered on any mission. The minigun was not carried. Author Note-Yankee Pad: A generic term used over the years for mission HLZ's scattered throughout the Panhandle area. Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 402. Information provided to Conboy by mission PIC EW Knight. Jim Pearson FEPA logbook. (Four plus forty-three hours.)

*Under terms of the peace agreement, both are to be completed within 60 days of the formation of a new coalition government.”<sup>39</sup>*

### **OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS**

Scratch Kanach departed for a long overdue home leave at the Kanach family dairy farm in the rolling green hills of Flemington, New Jersey. <sup>40</sup>

As Pearson, Olsen, and technician Tom Deeble confirmed on the 23rd flying 74M, there had been no improvement in the much-diminished or non-existent ADR signal strength since deployment and although suspected to be misaligned, the actual cause for the problem remained undetermined. (Four plus forty-three, one landing.) Another trip to the “only tree in Laos” was warranted. Therefore, purely by default, I inherited the primary mission commander billet to inspect and reposition the ADR, if necessary.

This undertaking would mark a first for me. Since I had not performed the same number of practice sessions as Scratch, I was unsure that I was completely ready to perform the task: a steady hover over the tree canopy in the dark using NVGs, while the Flight Mechanics performed their magic. There was another consideration. I had not worked with Kennedy and Low very much during the training sessions at PS-44. Such factors did not register with the AB-1 crowd, who believed that those of us in the Special Project were so experienced and talented that we could accomplish anything they asked, even by osmosis. Anyway,

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<sup>39</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 03/04/73.

<sup>40</sup> Like most towns in New Jersey Flemington was not far from my hometown in Plainfield. As the area encompassed three designer glass factories, my parents usually visited shops there once a year to admire and purchase interesting items. Mom even met and talked to Mrs. Kanach during one trip.

there was no time available for further practice. The job had to be completed forthwith. I had some confidence that I had learned a great deal from my back-up role observation, and in this business that significantly counted toward accomplishing an actual hands-on operation. Furthermore, in cockpit mate Dan Zube, I was confident that I had one of the finest navigators since Columbus discovered the New World.

Crews checked in at 1245 hours on the 24th. I was assigned Papa Hotel Alpha with Zube, Low, and Kennedy. The secondary ship's crew consisted of Higgins, Edwards, and Long in Papa Hotel Bravo. Knight, Hutchison, and their Flight Mechanic were to remain at Bouam Long, monitor the radio, and provide backup in Papa Hotel Echo, if required. (Four plus forty, two plus twenty night.)<sup>41</sup>

Unsure of our understanding, White House technicians went through another detailed account of how the ADR was to be aligned. It was precise work; no room for error. An Otter crew would help with the alignment by reporting the signal strength. After briefing, studying the latest photographs, and obtaining my set of NVG and two fresh batteries, we launched. Agreeing with and emulating Scratch's logical technique, I elected to conduct the work at last light, planning to use whatever subdued light was still available, and then the NVGs to establish a steady hover over the tree.

Timing was perfect. As expected, Zube navigated us to a position below and south of Phou Nia, where the sight picture of the mountain top and distinctive tree was indelibly burned into my brain, and still dimly sky-lighted against the northern sky. I wasted little time whipping up and over the tree, and slowly

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<sup>41</sup> EW Knight Email, 12/30/73.  
Jim Pearson logbook entry for 03/23/73.

reversing my heading to the south, for a rapid departure if so warranted.

By then it was completely dark. With everything perfect to that point, hoping the job would require no more than ten minutes, after taking a deep breath, I controlled my thoughts and concentrated solely on maintaining a steady hover.<sup>42</sup> There was no horizon for orientation, only an inky void in front of the helicopter. Therefore, despite waving branches tending to slightly distract my attention to the task, I attempted to focus on the wildly blowing canopy below me for reference, while Zube monitored the power instruments.

The Flight Mechanics established that the ADR was definitely out of place. Therefore, I cleared Kennedy, who was wearing NVGs, and Low to latch onto the device in preparation to lift and reposition it to a level position. The job proceeded, when suddenly the automatic stabilization equipment (ASE) pitch channel failed. This was a relatively rare occurrence, but even though hovering was rendered more difficult, it did not present earth shattering consequences.<sup>43</sup> However, what happened next was more disconcerting.

Despite hovering low over the canopy to help the cabin crew snag the ADR eye ring and insert the hoist hook with a modified gaff or boathook, they reported problems. Then Lloyd broke radio silence to inform me that dense fog was forming on the slopes

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<sup>42</sup> Maintaining a steady hover over a tree, at night, wearing NVGs with no horizon and only waving branches for reference, was arguably the most difficult challenge I had ever faced during my long flying career with Air America. Elapsed hovering time was important. Prolonged hovering was not recommended, for transmission and engine combining gearbox temperatures could exceed the published red line and eventually damage components.

<sup>43</sup> I had originally trained in the HUS-1 (H-34) at MCAF New River, Jacksonville, North Carolina, without using ASE. We only reverted to ASE operations when scheduled to go aboard the *USS Boxer* and the U.S. Navy regulations (NATOPS) required the use of functioning ASE.

below us, and rapidly ascending to our position. He indicated that I had better leave now. Intent on completing the job, there was not much I could do at the time but attempt to maintain a hover until losing all reference. I alerted Zube to be prepared to help, for this condition could be precarious should I experience vertigo and lose control of the helicopter. It seemed like my twin brother Murphy was once again hard at work trying to disrupt our operations at the least expected moment.

Finally, completely enveloped in thick fog and unable to complete the job, I radioed the Flight Mechanics below to cease what they were doing and immediately prepare for departure. Then, after informing Zube to closely monitor the instruments, I lifted to a high hover. Next, I rotated forward and, performing an instrument take off (ITO), punched through the dense mist, and set a course for Site-32. I was proud of my crew, for even though we did not complete the job, no one panicked, and we arrived at Boum Long unscathed.

The weather never improved, so, after fueling, we departed for Udorn. (Six plus forty, four plus forty-five night, three landings; block in time 2245 hours.)

Throughout human history adverse events often happen in threes, and I was not the only one to experience fun that night. Whether related to the Murphy effect, dreaded black air, inexperience, or merely a coincidence, bad things seem to occur more frequently at night. Such situations were all part of an aviator's learning process, and revealed if we were properly capable of adequately addressing sticky situations when they happened.

As Wayne Knight was departing Site-32 with the landing lights on, copious dust clouds from downwash caused him to

experience serious spatial disorientation problems that required Captain Bill Hutchison's assistance to forestall a disaster. <sup>44</sup>

As he had been after other aborted or failed missions, Rogers was philosophical and scheduled another realignment attempt the following evening. I was confident. Up to the time when weather had interceded to thwart the mission, I had performed my part. Now that I had gained some actual field experience, I was sure that if presented the right conditions the job could be accomplished.

Three sets of crews arrived by Company transportation the following morning, eager to get the job done and move on to another project. During the morning briefing, I mentioned that from my short time hovering over the tree, I considered the thin, flimsy branches the tree canopy presented for the ADR insertion were inadequate and not a good support for the device. Next, I inquired if there might be another acceptable line-of-sight level tree platform available. Wrong question to ask, for it struck a tender nerve. I was met with general hostility from the unit's technicians and pseudo-geniuses, who were adamant this was the only tree in the entire area meeting precise mathematical calculations, and all their criteria. Since there was an entire ridgeline of trees stretching along the south side of the road, I failed to believe this was true, but, as a mission implementer, I had no recourse but to attempt the task they demanded.

Leaving Wayne and Hutch at Bouam Long to monitor the radio in the bunker, we launched for Phou Nia. (Papa Hotel Echo-Five plus fifteen, two plus fifty-five night.) With Lloyd standing off to the south with the minigun to observe and advise, we arrived over the "only tree" at the proscribed time. While I

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<sup>44</sup> EW Knight Email, 06/26/00.

concentrated on hovering and Zube monitored the instruments, talking over the ICS system, Deak and Chuck directed me over the ADR, and went about their task of hooking the hoist cable to the relay's eye bolt. After they completed this task, as my NVG vision was generally limited to only what I could see straight down, I was directed to lift the device vertically, and deploy it a couple of feet to a supposedly level spot that was believed would support the broad device. However, this part of the canopy proved an equally inferior platform. Precious seconds passed as those below in the cabin section experienced difficulty finding a suitable location. This required raising, manually turning, and lowering the ADR until proper alignment was achieved. Then, when a string of fives from the Agency technician aboard the Otter indicated that a correct signal strength was achieved, with the ADR stable, the relay was released.

At this point, fifteen or more minutes had elapsed. Judging from my fatigue and stress level, each minute seemed like hours. There were other factors among the what-ifs. Our time on target was longer than I had expected. Though we were theoretically masked from the road to our rear, even with the long, deep ravine behind us tending to mute sound, engine and transmission whine and rotor flapping were likely perceptible to anyone on the valley floor. Exacerbating this, a southerly wind generally enhanced noise that had the potential to reverberate off hillsides and tended to compromise the desired clandestine nature of our work. Moreover, we were always in range of, and subject to, random indirect mortar fire.

Elated at finally positioning the ADR in the best possible spot, I pulled pitch and departed for Site-32 to await the Otter crew's signal assessment and further instructions from Udorn.



Apparently, it was satisfactory, and we eventually were released, arriving in the parking ramp just before midnight. (Seven plus five, three plus forty night, four landings.)

I was assigned home standby while Jim Pearson and Pete Parker, flying 74M, remained aloft for several hours checking for signals from both the mother tap and ADR. Although receiving minimal output from the relay, it was obvious that the tap was still functioning, but, without former USAF MiGCap cover, and subject to enemy aircraft interception, it was not efficient or wise to maintain a continuous aircraft listening watch. (Five plus twenty-one.) <sup>45</sup>

We were summoned to the White House to discuss the latest revelation. Discounting any device failure, several theories, explanations, and an abundance of advice were proffered by the gnomes of AB-1: there was no telephone traffic at the time, or a premature cut had resulted in misalignment, or rotor downwash or high winds had once again caused a problem. It was obvious that further investigation was warranted. Also, advice was offered by Buddy's devil's advocate, Wally Smith, that I should lift to a high hover over the ADR before taking off, to preclude blowing it off the assumed "level" platform. Although not meant as a stinging rebuke to my technique, I took it as such. What the hell did these rear echelon pogues know about the conditions and what actually went on in that environment? Even if I followed their advice, although diminished, rotor downwash would still be generated, and we would surely be observed from any high hover and possibly come under fire from the valley. <sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Jim Pearson FEPA logbook entry for 03/26/73.

<sup>46</sup> Wayne Knight Email, 12/29/00. At this time, Wayne was not aware the ADR came out of the tree. He thought it just settled on a skewed angle and out of alignment, but remained on top of the tree.

Lack of coherent signals from the relay led to subsequent photographs from 42Z that divulged the device was precariously perched partway down the tree.

### **THE CHICAGO GRIP**

On the 27th we were scheduled to retrieve, and re-set the ADR. Requiring more care than previously, this would necessitate a person descending into the tree to assess any damage and hook the hoist cable to the ADR for lifting. Such a process required night vision goggles, a flashlight covered with IR paper, a substantial length of intercommunication (ICS) cable, and a means for a man to both descend and ascend the cable at the same time as the relay. The latter means was realized by a sturdy metal tool named a "Chicago Grip."

The genesis of the grip for Agency work occurred when Wayne Knight entered Buddy's office one afternoon to discuss methods of deploying large numbers of Chinook-lifted troops into restricted landing zones that would not support a landing. Using the cargo bay winch in the cargo mode was an obvious choice, but it was a slow process, and discharging men in a timely fashion was the problem. As a farm boy in Arizona, while stringing or repairing fences, Wayne had used a hand-held tool that would firmly grip and release barbed wire. The grip was very efficient. On the basis of this information, Rogers cabled Langley and described the device. A reasonable facsimile was eventually discovered in a Chicago hardware outlet. Several "Chicago Grips" were purchased and hastily delivered to Udorn. <sup>47</sup>

Making a case for one of our crewmembers to descend from the helicopter on the hoist cable, Buddy touted, waved, and demonstrated the device's attributes, securely clamping onto a

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<sup>47</sup> EW Knight Emails, 07/18/01, 05/13/73, 05/15/73. These grips were not pricey at thirteen dollars each.

short piece of cable. Since Deak was the most experienced member of our team, he readily agreed to use the device following some practice. With Chuck manipulating the hoist, this training could be achieved at Udorn or Bouam Long. The proposal appeared feasible. I was proud of these gutsy young men, who were willing to attempt anything within reason. They were not hero types, but merely competent workmates, although a complaining Kennedy often talked about shooting out people's lights. I had complete confidence in their ability to perform the task, but there was always the unknown with which to contend.

Although the plan appeared viable, as always, Murphy needed to be considered: what could possibly go wrong would often go wrong. Because of intangibles and the unknown, I was a bit skeptical of using such an unfamiliar device under actual night field conditions. As always, this attitude kept me on my toes. I was proud of my unblemished record. In over ten years of flying the line in Laos I had never had anyone injured inside or around my helicopter. However, this mission would mark the first time a crewmember stepped completely out of the cabin section clamped to a hoist cable. Arguably a hazardous operation even during daylight, the danger would be exponentially compounded in the dark. In addition, the operation would certainly extend our time hovering over the target. To preclude exposure and the chance of the mission being compromised, our philosophy had always been to quickly perform the job, then depart ASAP.

There were other equally concerning factors. So many negative odds were piling up. We had penetrated the Route-65-Phou Nia area so many times that I began to harbor an uncomfortable feeling that had been festering for some time. It was akin to the time I was shot down on the southern Plain of Jars. Moreover, one did not unduly tempt fate. Every trip

increased our exposure and a chance of ambush by an enemy patrol. But we had to cope with this eventuality on every trip.

Like a broken record, I reiterated the problems the delicate tree canopy afforded, and the degree of difficulty it presented for supporting and retaining the cumbersome device. However, as before, Roger's people maintained tunnel vision. They would not consider choosing another tree. It was the **only** spot on the entire ridgeline that provided a direct, uncompromised line-of-sight to the phone tap. (Later events would prove this supposition to be false.) In addition, I considered our training at PS-44 lacking in all phases of the operation. I wished we had not been so lax, and had conducted participant head sessions to consider all the potential problems that could negatively impact the mission. Actual insertion practice into several different trees might have revealed and resolved potential problems. Performing this instead of so much LORAN and NVG training, at which we were already highly proficient, might have been beneficial. (Of course, using hindsight, one can easily make the argument that one never feels completely trained.) We were quite aware that much of what we were endeavoring to accomplish had never been attempted before--or this is what we were led to believe--and we were certainly breaking new ground. There had been precious little past experience to build upon, hence, the steep on-the-job learning curve. This was first evident from the length of time required to complete the Vinh tap. As affirmed in the popular television Star Track episodes, we were "going boldly where no man had ever gone before."

Our armada departed. My crew was in Papa Hotel Delta. Lloyd and his crew were in another Twinpac. Jim Pearson and Pete Parker preceded us in 74M to assess regional weather, provide a radio platform, convey signal strength of the ADR if our mission

was a success, and lend commando raider support if necessary. (Six plus forty, three plus thirty-six night, one landing.)<sup>48</sup>

Staging out of Bouam Long, we had not proceeded far before Pearson alerted us to unworkable conditions in the target area. We returned to Site-32 and waited impatiently until apprised by Udorn to RTB. Disappointed that our task was far from complete, it was a disgruntled crew that blocked in at 2010 hours. (Five plus ten, two plus ten night, four landings.)

Another attempt to realign the ADR was scheduled for Wednesday. By then we were well versed in mission preparation. A late morning brief in Buddy's office included standard weather forecasts, moon phases, and anything else deemed necessary or unusual. Current black and white photographs were assiduously studied using the three-dimensional vision (3D) stereopsis equipment in the photo lab. They still showed blurred, indistinct images of the ADR positioned on the side of the tree. This exercise was followed by transferring personal gear consisting of our weapons, survival gear, and box lunches to our respective aircraft. A thorough preflight was followed by electronic systems checks. Then a short taxi to the Q warehouse to install the minigun and accessories in the SAR ship and obtain NVG devices and extra batteries for me and the two Flight Mechanics. This time, concerned about the relay unit having been discovered by an enemy patrol, I briefed the men to be extra diligent for wires, hand grenades, or mines strung in the trees, or anything else out of the ordinary. Explosives in the trees were not inconceivable, for I had encountered something like this long ago, while working a UH-34D at Ban Na.

Nature's wonders were sometimes encountered in Laos. During one of our trips north, while flying a normal flight track west

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<sup>48</sup> Jim Pearson FEPA log entry for 03/27/73.

of the Plain of Jars late in the day, backlighted by the sinking sun, I observed a beautiful circular rainbow beneath, or adjacent to a cloud and a rain shower. Discounting the legendary pot of gold at the end of a rainbow, and used to a standard half circle as seen from the ground, it was the first time I realized that while viewed airborne, a rainbow was seen as a perfect circle. Snapping a picture of the natural phenomenon, I wondered how many people in the world had ever seen this sight. <sup>49</sup>

With Pearson and Parker already established in orbit (74M, nine plus eighteen, two plus twenty night, two landings), we arrived at Site-32 about dark. Met by site Customers, we learned that enemy activity had increased around the Sop Kao river valley (called four-rivers), and were cautioned to maintain altitude and use care approaching the base. <sup>50</sup>

The mission was slated to be performed in total darkness. After a dip and over technique to assure masking from the road, I conducted a rapid approach to the tree and established a steady hover facing north to better observe my work area and aid Deak in his "Chicago Grip" descent to the ADR. This was difficult, for I did not have much canopy visible from my right window to aid me in maintaining a stable hover.

Kennedy's communications with Chuck and the cockpit were loud and clear; he had sufficient tools and lengthy ICS cable to perform the job. Then a setback occurred. While struggling to attach the hoist hook to the ADR, the relay unexpectedly dislodged and plunged to the ground. Separating the men from the boys, our crew was not only hired for our experience level, but for our flexibility and ability to think quickly, and make critical decisions in situations just like this.

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<sup>49</sup> Circular rainbows: In later years I observed this rainbow effect from commercial aircraft windows. It is now sometimes discussed on the Internet.

<sup>50</sup> Jim Pearson logbook entry for 03/28/73.



Late afternoon rainbow looking southeast toward the Plain of Jars. Unfortunately, the photo failed to capture the rainbow's complete circle.

Author Collection.

We briefly discussed our limited options. I did not insist, and it was Kennedy's decision to continue to the ground, assess the unit's damage, and retrieve the relay if possible. Low, who also wore NVGs, expertly manipulated the cable and helped Deak to carefully maneuver around periphery branches to the ground.

Since the goggles afforded me limited intermediate vision, I was not able to see the ground well.<sup>51</sup> However, through waving branches I could observe illumination of the IR-coated flashlight indicating Kennedy's movement. Before long, Deak relayed that the ADR appeared damaged, but intact. Then he attempted to attach the ADR for lifting. All this was consuming too much time.<sup>52</sup>

Fastening the "Chicago Grip" to the cable well above the ADR, Deak was positioned for the lift. Finally, he signaled to begin the lift. As Chuck slowly reeled in the cable from the cabin section, both men laboriously attempted to avoid snagging the device on anything.<sup>53</sup> For added clearance from obstacles, I hovered further to the left.

After Deak and the relay achieved adequate clearance, following his directions, I slid back over the canopy and slowly reversed my heading 180 degrees to the south. I agonizingly realized that we had been exposed for too long, and the enemy

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<sup>51</sup> With a twist, the protruding NVG lenses could be adjusted for far and near vision, but nothing between. In a pinch, by sacrificing binocular for monocular vision, one could adjust one lens for near and the other for distance vision. Then by closing one eye or the other the preferred vision could be achieved.

<sup>52</sup> EW Knight Email, 12/30/00. Receiving abbreviated coded updates from the Otter, AB-1 personnel were on tenterhooks when the men became aware that our time in the area was becoming agonizingly long. They were also concerned by the amount of time Kennedy was spending on the hoist cable.

<sup>53</sup> To prevent overheating the hoist motor, subsequent burn out and failure, the system was programed for the cable to reel onto the drum excruciatingly slow when using the up mode.



was probably wondering if we were having a party on the mountaintop, but I had little choice.

While preparing to redeploy the device in the center of the canopy, a thunderous boom occurred somewhere behind us. Reverberating off the hills, the blast sounded very close, but since the sound emanated from our six o'clock position, it was impossible to determine the exact proximity or actual direction of the explosion. Chuck, the only person situated to observe our rear saw nothing. This could be explained as the explosion occurring down slope more than a thousand feet below on the valley side of Phou Nia. Thinking the detonation could have been a ranging round, I expected additional explosions, but they never arrived, and I wondered if enemy gunners had been shooting at helicopter sounds while I was at a high hover.

From the number of times we had penetrated the area, something like this was not unexpected. Despite having been subject to enemy fire before on a number of occasions, everyone was more than a little unnerved by the event. Now there was additional motivation to finish the job quickly and "get the hell out of Dodge." Seconds counted, so a "suitable" spot was found and with the Otter's concurrence as to signal strength, the ADR was deployed in the jumble of delicate waving banshee branches.

Not wasting any time, I executed the high hover procedure recommended by AB-1 pundits, added full power, rotated forward, and departed for Udorn. To a man we were exhausted from the demands of the long mission and the nervous energy expended.

After blocking in at 2220 hours we bussed to the White House steps. (Six plus fifty, three plus twenty-five night, four landings.) While standing in Roger's office, with his associates listening, and assuming that the report to Washington would be colorful, I explained the details of the strange and tortuous

night. This included the disconcerting explosion and my supposition that during the extended process of the operation we had been exposed, compromised, and received enemy fire. Like the Grail rocket incident at Thakhet, Buddy always seemed to have a positive explanation for unusual events. He said that the explosion probably resulted from nocturnal roadwork on Route-65. What? There were several elements wrong with this explanation. I had experienced large detonations in the past, after rockets landed close to me at Long Tieng and at Lima Lima on the Plain, and I perceived this blast to be very close. In addition, since all road interdiction in Laos had ceased in February, there were no more bomb craters to fill. Finally, if road construction was being conducted at night as supposed, why weren't we advised of this? No, the smell factor did not meet the test. Roger's explanation seemed weak and did not wash with me. As much as I respected the man, his credibility continued to decline. I did not think that anyone in our crew who heard the blast believed that we were not subject to incoming fire.

At the end of our discussion, I was informed the relay was sending information from the tap, albeit poorly, and then began producing diminishing signals. Following this revelation, we were dismissed pending further evaluation.

Otter pilots Pearson, Parker, and technician Tom Deeble were back in orbit the following day and night. (Four plus twenty-one, one plus thirty-nine night, two landings.) The crew conducted another check on 2 April.<sup>54</sup> There were no further transmissions received from the relay. Pending photographic reconnaissance and further instructions from Langley headquarters, further missions were temporarily placed on hold. When photos were examined in detail, no sign of the ADR was

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<sup>54</sup> Jim Pearson FEPA logbook entry for 03/29/73 and 04/02/73.

visible. And the assumption was it had fallen through the tree to the ground again. Since no more ADRs were available for deployment and enemy probes impacted our launch base at Bouam Long, while we waited for new relays to be manufactured and delivered to Southeast Asia, and the situation around Site-32 addressed, a lapse in the snake-bitten operation was declared. Additionally, a break in upper Military Region Two operations would allow Phou Nia to cool off. Consequently, in a combination of STO and days off, I was not scheduled to fly for nine days.

### **MANAGEMENT CHANGES**

Changes in local Udorn station management often occurred without immediate recognition or salary upgrading. This time a circular was distributed on 1 April depicting a *"newly approved organizational chart for the Northern Thailand Division. The newly approved organizational chart will be published soon and the Division manual, to be known as the Base manual, will be revised to reflect the changes."*

WF Palmer was appointed Manager of Ground Support-MGS/Udorn from Senior Operations Manager.

EW Knight Assistant Manager Flight Crews-MFC/Udorn from Chief Pilot Rotary Wing. <sup>55</sup>

M Burke-Chief Pilot Rotary Wing Udorn from Assistant Chief Pilot/Rotary Wing.

RD Davis-Director, Industrial Engineering-DIE/UTH/UTH from ASCP-T.

LA Price-Operations Engineer-OENG/Udorn.

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<sup>55</sup> EW Knight Email 12/27/00, Wayne's new title was a minor move for only a couple of months before assuming the Director of Operations job. CJ Abadie originally favored Jack Forney for the billet, but Jack opted for a position in Washington, DC.

RG Ford-Assistant to Vice President Northern Thailand (CJ Abadie) Division-MPA&IR-NTD.

CK Lane-Manager, Personnel Administration & Industrial Relations-MPA&IR/Udorn from Personnel Manager.

G Eiler-Chief Flight Mechanic-CFM/Udorn.

Doctor B Viriyakul-Chief Medical Officer-CMO/Udorn.

HS Tang Chief Communications-C/COM/Udorn.

V Clarkson-Principal of Air America School-P/AAS/Udorn.

*"Job descriptions for these positions will be published by the Personnel Administration and Industrial Relations Department and will be made part of the Division Manual.*

*JL Forney to continue in position as [Assistant Vice President of Technical Services] (AVPTS) and will be in charge of all aircraft maintenance activities.*

*As requirements become more clearly defined and the needs of the Division are more apparent, the remaining slots on the organization chart will be filled or eliminated as appropriate [at this time of flux management was undergoing its own downsizing and restructuring].*

*Supervisory and management personnel presently assigned to slots which are not reflected on the new organization chart and whose positions have not altered by memorandum to the circular will continue in their present position until notified of a change. [I was still logging instructor pilot hours and was not reverted from SIP to IP until 1 May]."* <sup>56</sup>

Changes were also occurring at Air America headquarters Taipei, Taiwan. Before Knight transitioned upstairs to an office next to Abadie and Dick Ford, and Marius Burke became Chief Pilot Helicopters, he received a note from system Vice President of Flight Operations Jim Walker, who was being replaced:

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<sup>56</sup> Circular Northern Thailand Division Air America, Inc., 04/01/73.

"Dear Wayne,

*Please accept my deep appreciation for your loyalty and support to me during my VPFO days.*

*You probably have one of the toughest and most unappreciated jobs in the Company..*

*Every best wish for your future and success..."* <sup>57</sup>

As Wayne gradually transitioned into his new job, except for Special Project missions, his flight activities were somewhat reduced. According to Abadie, at least at first, the new job was a total non-flying assignment. However, he still attended most Special Project briefings at the White House. <sup>58</sup>

### **BURKE'S PROBLEMS**

Marius Burke began to get involved in the Special Project about this time. Responsible for scheduling crews and aircraft, Marius assumed that he would be granted a greater role in the Agency program. <sup>59</sup> He initially was granted a special authorization card to gain access to the White House. Then something happened. Knight was away on STO, leave, or at PS-44. There was considerable Agency activity at the Udorn base, but Marius was no longer privy to what was happening. He was not briefed, and was eventually taken to task for not ensuring that crew, aircraft, and equipment logistics were properly addressed. Complaints and dissatisfaction from the Customer regarding the

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<sup>57</sup> Jim Walker was replaced as Vice President of Operations by Earl Richmond, a former USAF A-1E pilot and Porter pilot. Mr. Richmond came to Udorn after FEPA had been defeated to explain new Company guidelines. Pogo Hunger asked him an objectionable question, and was met with sarcasm that was not generally accepted. It was a new era in Company-employee relations.

<sup>58</sup> Wayne Knight Email, 01/02/01. Wayne is not sure what changed Ab's mind to allow him to fly. Perhaps no one else briefed him as well as Wayne and there was not much rapport between Abadie and Burke.

<sup>59</sup> Author Note: Marius Burke signed my Crewmember Duty Report in April.

issue flowed into Abadie's office and then downstairs to Burke. Curious, highly irritated at being out of the loop, Marius indicated that he knew nothing about their problems. He had a definite need to know, as he was responsible for details organizing men and hardware for missions.

During this period, Burke observed another aspect of Buddy Rogers that he found objectionable, and he did not get along with him. Burke was shunned and Rogers did not want him around. Consequently, Marius could not obtain a peek into the Special Project operation while Rogers ran the show. <sup>60</sup>

When Knight returned, the two men arranged a sit down to discuss Burke's concerns. He was not aware of Burke's sour feelings for Rogers, but was conscious Buddy was not enamored with him. Suspecting that Marius was not left out as much as he indicated, Knight confessed that something did not seem right, and he would look into it. He was also certain that Burke wanted to become more involved in a flying role, but with Buddy in charge of the program, this was not possible.

Knight talked to Sam Johnson, CIA's head security person in Udorn regarding the issue. It required a lot of digging and

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<sup>60</sup> EW Knight Email, 12/26/00. Knight doubts that Buddy's bias toward Burke had anything to do with Vinetra's origins, but admits this could have been the overriding problem. There were other concerns. Wayne recalls being asked to AB-1 to discuss why Burke and his good friend Paul Walton were making a trip to South Africa.

record checking before anything turned up. <sup>61</sup> We were more closely monitored by intelligence agencies than anyone imagined, and this was particularly the case with anyone married to a woman of Vietnamese origin. <sup>62</sup> After further checking, it was revealed that there was a Vietnamese girl with a name similar to Burke's wife, and that she was a communist sympathizer travelling around the world, to the States and other venues. For some reason or another, it was determined that this was Vinetra, and Marius's personal file was red flagged, indicating that he was a security risk. This was done without further inquiries. After rendering the security risk decision, in Burke's view, security never bothered to follow up or pursue the matter. Marius was effectively black-listed, and the word was passed in the intelligence community, "*Don't tell Burke anything.*"

Over time it was clear to Knight that Burke was never going to climb the ladder into higher intelligence circles. AB-1 types were not fans of his. Consequently, Wayne never conducted

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<sup>61</sup> EW Knight Email, 12/27/00, 12/28/00, 12/29/00. In one Email Wayne did not seem to recall a Sam Johnson. In another he stated, "*It seems possible there was a Johnson at AB-1 Security, but I never had any real dealings with him.*" He recalled Jim Barron from the early days. Also, John Raines and Bob Leonard as Security Chiefs. "*I believe Rinker in Taipei was an Agency type. I think John Raines had connections, and Bob Leonard either already had or developed some pretty close ties while at Udorn.*"

Years later, while exchanging Emails with the Author, Wayne did not recall a Vietnamese girl with a name similar to Vinetra's, and not discussing the Burke case with Sam Johnson.

<sup>62</sup> As early as 1965, Marius's wife Vinet was being investigated by the Bangkok based Thai Civil Investigation Department (CID). Prasuit, a purported nephew of Khun Tha, visited us one day at our Soi Mahamit bungalow. Working undercover, wearing civilian clothes, the personable man identified himself to me as a CID agent. We had a pleasant chat and he casually inquired about Vinette. Speaking Thai with Tuie, she indicated that she did not know Vinette well and could not be much help. The subject of the visit failed to register with me at the time. As a lot was going on in 1965, I forgot Prasuit's visit, and as far as I knew, Burke was never aware of the CID inquiry.

further advances toward integrating Burke into more classified jobs, as it was obvious that he would always be rejected.

Burke later transitioned to PIC in the S-58T, and was eventually allowed to participate in Special Project missions.<sup>63</sup>

### **CASH CRASH**

During the morning of 30 March, while working Bell 204B N1196W at the Hotel Uniform (HU) position (TG8140), four miles northwest of Ban Na (LS-15), Ted R. Cash, Ray P. Ferrante (DOH 12/29/72), and B Boonreung were involved in a serious crash.

The flight originated from Site-15. Carrying eight eighty-eight-pound bags of rice, they were assigned to supply local defensive pads. After an hour, five bags had been offloaded at three positions.

Ferrante was conducting a final approach to the 4,500-foot mean sea level (MSL) HU pad at twenty-five knots indicated air speed (KIAS), when rapid loss of N2 (engine) and Nr (rotor) led to what the men described as a settling sensation. Collective pitch control was lowered to regain RPM and right tail rotor pedal added, but settling continued.

Ground contact was made on a steep slope with the aircraft facing downhill. Then N1196W began rolling downhill to the left. Flight Mechanic Boonreung was ejected during one of the rotations. Reduced basically to junk, the machine rolled over seven times before coming to rest at the base of the hill.

Directly after 96W came to rest, a seriously injured, but ambulatory Ferrante struggled to the top of the hill. Local villagers assisted Captain Cash to the rescue helicopter.

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<sup>63</sup> EW Knight Emails.

Marius Burke interviews.

Although the issue is still somewhat clouded today regarding Vinetra's status, it seemingly was resolved in 1973. During August, I began flying Special Project Twinpac missions with Marius.



Despite incurring serious head and back injuries, probably still in shock, Ted was more upset by the fact that someone had stolen his .38 caliber pistol.

The Pilots were evacuated to the 432nd USAF hospital in Udorn.

Courtesy of chemically induced methods, Cash was sleeping when Knight visited him in the hospital just after his arrival. Ferrante was still being evaluated. Boonreung was treated for minor scratches, a lacerated forehead and released. <sup>64</sup>

There were plans to recover the badly damaged Bell with a CH-47 when sling rigging preparations were completed. <sup>65</sup>

The next day, following continued evaluations, both Cash and Ferrante's conditions were considered stable and improved since their arrival. Extensive medical examinations revealed that Ted had fractured the fourth thoracic vertebra with a possible cervical fracture. There was some numbness to his right thumb, index, and middle finger. In addition, there were multiple contusions, lacerations, and abrasions to his face, left wrist, both lower legs, and left foot.

Air Force doctors placed two pins in Cash's head in order to stretch his damaged vertebrae and relieve pain. The cervical traction procedure failed to work because he constantly pulled and enlarged the holes. Doctors had to re-drill and create a new set of holes.

When Mike Jarina visited him, Cash said, *"This is a stupid way to make a living. I'm never going to fly another aircraft again."*

Mike laughed at this statement, saying, *"When you get out of here, you are going to fly again."*

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<sup>64</sup> Mike Jarina Interviews.

Air America XOXO, 1402 hours, EW Knight, 03/30/73.

<sup>65</sup> Air America XOXO, 1040 hours. EW Knight, 03/30/73.  
Joe Leeker, *The Aircraft of Air America*, Bell 204B, N1196W.





Many helicopter landing zones (HLZ) located on elevated mountains were large enough for the aircraft, but were sloped, and afforded poor wave off capabilities. These variables provided little room for pilot error or aircraft plagued with maintenance problems like an engine failure.

Author Collection.



Ferrante had suffered multiple contusions and abrasions over his face, chest, abdomen, and limbs. He also incurred a cervical muscular strain and possible internal injuries to his abdomen. He was treated by local management. Ray was provided a cervical collar, and medications. <sup>66</sup>

### **THE RED CROSS**

Known as a conscientious and efficient Air America American Woman's Club volunteer for items like teaching American women to model and modeling clothes herself, Tuie was recruited by Melissa Rudolphs (Big Ed's wife) to work at the USAF hospital as a volunteer American Red Cross representative. She had been working there in various capacities during the morning two days a week since early March. As the only person fluent in the Thai language, and knowledgeable in Thai culture, she acted primarily as a translator, assisting the Air Force medical staff with injured Thai army patients.

When we lived on Benjarn Road, the Cash family resided two houses down from us. When Tuie was conducting ward rounds and discovered Ted a patient, she stopped by his bed. At the time, Cash was lying prone on a special bed designed for back injury patients. While she was standing next to the bed Cash said, "Hello Tuie." Amazed that he recognized her from a face down position, she asked how he knew it was her. Incredulously, Ted indicated it was her tiny feet, which he considered

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<sup>66</sup> Air America XOXO, 1600 hours, Knight, 03/31/73.  
Mike Jarina interviews.

extraordinarily beautiful. <sup>67</sup>

### **WHAT WAR?**

Toward the end of March, the last American troops departed South Vietnam. Although 8,500 U.S. civilians (including those from Air America) remained in country, only a few Marine guards remained to guard the Saigon Embassy. The MACV unit was disbanded. It was replaced on site by a Defense Attaché Office (DAO) which, like the original Programs Evaluation Office (PEO), and then Requirements Office (RO) in Laos, was charged with coordinating logistic and communications support to the RVNAF, the Military Assistance Program (MAP), and budgeting. This also included training, intelligence operations, and liaison with the RVNAF. The former MACV military command and control element was relocated to the Nakhon Phanom base in Thailand. <sup>68</sup>

### **CHANGING THE GUARD**

Consistent with USG policy to maintain the status quo on Laos, Ambassador Godley was slated to be replaced by a less aggressive individual (Whitehouse) in April. Unlike former Lao ambassadors, known as a State Department hawk, Mac Godley attempted to delineate to his Washington bosses how the new U.S. goals and commitments would affect the country. He also speculated whether the U.S. might react to increased communist

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<sup>67</sup> Prapapon Casterlin's recollections of her tenure with the Red Cross: Wounded Thai irregulars were still being flown down from Laos in bunches, and doctors and nurses were often overwhelmed by the influx of wounded men. Tuie assisted by translating, cleaning wounds, changing bandages, and offering words of encouragement to the injured men. During the course of her tenure, Tuie encountered a gut-shot man who, as a young man, had shared the adjacent maid's quarters with our houseboy Gott at our Benjarn Road house. Accompanied by adequate security teams, she also journeyed into remote northeast villages with USAF medical people conducting people to people programs.

<sup>68</sup> John Bowman, *Almanac*.

aggression through only airstrikes in lieu of more effective paramilitary operations.

The message he received from the secretary was tailored to be both vague and duplicitous, leaving out Godley's pointed reference to U.S commitments or what action he should take in case of communist escalation. Consequently, for the remainder of his tour the "Field Marshal" arranged for the RLG forces to continue to remain in a defensive posture. <sup>69</sup>

Likely stimulating the ambassador's concern was enemy movement in three sensitive areas. Bouam Long's positions were still being probed, a North Vietnamese regiment was reportedly moving south along Route-4 from the Xieng Khouang Valley toward Ban Tha Vieng, and the Sala Phou Koun crossroad garrison was always vulnerable to attack. Souvanna Phouma was so concerned about the situation that he threatened to request U.S. airstrikes renewed if those positions were vigorously attacked with the intention of capturing them. <sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> EW Knight Email, 05/21/17. Wayne had been introduced to Ambassador Godley at classified meetings in the secure glass conference room beneath the Vientiane Embassy. Another meeting occurred late one morning in Udorn. Wayne entered the Club Rendezvous dining room where the U.S. Ambassador and two service staff employees were engaged in a rather loud conversation. After inquiring as to the nature of the beef, Wayne discovered that Godley was unaware of our chit system initiated some years ago by then Base Manager, Ben Moore, to forestall employee thievery, and he was attempting to pay for his meal with cash. Wayne intervened and handed him his chit book. In later encounters, Godley recalled Knight's kindness.

<sup>70</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 401, 402, 407 fn 7.

*"The war is over from our viewpoint, but how it is going to affect the home front is speculation. Right now nothing looks good for the immediate future. Prices on food and goods are out of sight and our friend "Tricky Dick" does not seem to be able to control the situation"*

Letter from Home, 04/01/73.

**M**embers of the Committee on Foreign Relations U.S. Senate, Moose-Lowenstein et al., arrived in Southeast Asia on 28 March to conduct a comprehensive Congressional fact finding mission during the sixty-day period following the Paris peace agreement. Remaining until 19 April, they visited Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam. They examined the U.S presence, military assistance programs (MAP), and the political and economic factors relating to these programs.

Before departing Washington, the committee was informed by Executive Branch officials that the plan for Laos was to reduce attaché personnel in the Vientiane Embassy to forty; five would be assigned to a greatly reduced Requirements Office, in charge of administering the delivery of RLA military assistance program items, and formerly part of the USAID Mission. The plan was to remove the unit from AID and operate it as part of the Defense Attaché's Office (DAO). Project 404 (the black operations that directed many aspects of U.S. operations in Laos) would be phased out. These plans were contingent on North Vietnam's performance with regard to the withdrawal provisions of the Lao ceasefire agreement.

At the time of the Lao visit, serious fighting had almost ceased. Granted, immediately after the agreement was signed, the

Vietnamese drove RLG forces out of the strategic Paksong site on the Bolovens Plateau, but there was little offensive action throughout the country since. Indeed, during March the number of war deaths had dropped to eighteen friendly and thirty-four enemy combatants. However, in Military Region Two there was some concern that Vietnamese forces would move against Ban Tha Vieng (LS-13), and the Pathet Lao might attack the Sala Phou Khoun (Route-13/7) crossroads between Vientiane and Luang Prabang. There was no mention of the potential threat to Bouam Long.

On the eleventh, reports indicated that, supported by Lao T-28 pilots, government troops defending Tha Vieng, Site-13 on Route-4 still held most positions and had suffered few casualties.<sup>1</sup>

Other than those isolated cases, Vietnamese and Pathet Lao troop movements were limited to minor redeployments, apparently

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<sup>1</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 04/12/73.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 402. On 12 April Vietnamese units launched the expected attack against the forward lines of BC-617A and elements of GM-28 defending Tha Vieng. The site fell on the 15th. In response, Souvanna Phouma requested U.S. air support. Following presidential approval, USG responded strongly. Two flights of B-52s from Sattahip, Thailand, pounded the communists. (In a Washington, D.C. WSAG meeting, Admiral Moorer indicated that twenty B-52s and twenty-three F-111s participated in the strikes.)

FRUS, #43 WSAG meeting, Laos, 04/17/73. When Tha Vieng was bombed, the enemy concentrated there dispersed into the woods. After the first day, there were no good targets deemed worth bombing. The irregulars crossed the river to resume some of their positions.

Enemy threats were reported at Sala Phou Khoun.

FRUS, #42, WSAG, 04/16/73. Depending on Souvanna Phouma's approval, expanding bombing of the Tha Vieng area, Route-7, and the Plain of Jars complex was considered, also strikes into the Trail system and northern South Vietnam. Accordingly, an urgent cable was sent to Ambassador Godley with instructions to query Souvanna's reactions to the proposed options.

No action emanated from the proposal, and the action at Tha Vieng marked the final USAF combat mission in the area, but generally curtailed further ceasefire violations for a time.



Ban Tha Vieng area south of Route-4 and the Nam Ngiou. The government site was located at the southern end of the dirt track from Xieng Khouang Ville, where it turned east toward Tha Thom (LS-11) on its way to Paksane on the Mekong River. Used as a blocking position by the Lao government, it was often contested and changed hands many times over the years.

Author Collection.



designed to consolidate defensive positions along easily defensible terrain features. In certain areas there were signs that Vietnamese units were seeking to decrease their visibility by assuming positions to the rear of Pathet Lao units, and by Lao-izing certain territorial units which had previously contained substantial numbers of Vietnamese troops.

After initial arrival in the administrative capital, there was a feeling of cautious optimism among U.S. Embassy staff that a provisional government might be agreed on by the Lao parties within a few weeks following the 21 March target date established in the ceasefire agreement. On the basis of this expectation, all operational elements of the U.S. Embassy, except for USAID, were making plans for substantial reductions in their normal activities. Included were schedules for phasing out CIA paramilitary advisors and support personnel, major reductions in the number of U.S. Army and Air Force advisors, and in the Army and Air Force Attaches. The U.S. Embassy had planned to notify the Company about **the termination of the Air America contract provided for notification renewal for the last quarter of the current fiscal year by 1 April.** On 1 April the Air America contract would be greatly reduced, and a meeting had been scheduled for that purpose. While some more realistic elements in the Embassy were apprehensive about the proposed reduction of Air America services, the official view of the Mission was that curtailing Air America operations would be a clear signal that the U.S. intended to comply with the provisions of the ceasefire agreement. <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> That same evening, the Vientiane Embassy learned that Deputy Chief Trefry had been instructed by his superiors not to reduce the Air America contact. However, a massive reduction was scheduled over the summer. The Raven forward air control (FAC) program was scheduled to phase out during the same period, with RLAF personnel assuming the duty.

During the group's visit, U.S. air operations in Cambodia intensified. Fighting was only sporadic in Laos and had appreciably declined in South Vietnam. At the time, American forces had departed South Vietnam, and U.S. POWs were repatriated. <sup>3</sup> The U.S. was no longer bombing in Vietnam and there were minor exceptions in Laos.

The report, written later during 18 May, specified that peace had not come to fruition in Indochina and that all four negotiations were deadlocked. In Laos, negotiations on the establishment of a Provisional Government of National Union between the Royal Lao Government and the Pathet Lao in Vientiane had stalled. Laos was divided between government- and Pathet Lao-controlled areas along lines which generally followed those existing at the time of the July 1962 Accords, except that the third of the country remaining under government control was now severed by an enemy force which reached the Mekong River just north of a point opposite Nakhon Phanom, where the principal U.S. headquarters for military operations in Indochina is located. <sup>4</sup>

The situation in Laos was deemed quite different than the other two battleground countries. Overtly, the Lao ceasefire was generally observed. However, withdrawal of foreign forces, the North Vietnamese, the Thai, the U.S. forward air controllers (FACs), the Chinese, and dismantling of the U.S. paramilitary was

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<sup>3</sup> Hank Edwards Email, 05/09/99. From Jeanne Doggs rebuttal of Jane Fonda's Woman of the Year Honor: To the POWs descriptions of the torture they received at the hands of the North Vietnamese and Jane's reply was: *"I think that one of the only ways that we are going to redeem ourselves as a country for what we have done there is not to hail the POW's as heroes, because they are hypocrites and liars... They are exaggerating, probably for their own self-interest...Guys who misbehaved and treated their guards in a racist manner and tried to escape were tortured."*

<sup>4</sup> John Vogt was commanding Officer USSAG/7th Air Force at the Royal Thai Air Force facility Udorn, Thailand; RG Trefry, Deputy Chief JUSMAG-Thailand-commanded the military assistance program in Laos.

awaiting formation of a Provisional Government of National Union (PGNU). The ceasefire agreement stipulated that the sixty-day period for the withdrawal of foreign troops would not begin until formation of the PGNU.

The ceasefire agreement stated that the new government was to be formed within thirty days after the ceasefire, but this did not occur and negotiations became stalled. There was no evidence that Vietnamese leaders were inclined to reduce their political and military involvement, because they wanted to continue using the eastern logistical Trail system to shunt men and materiel into South Vietnam.

As a result of the slowdown in formation of a new government, former plans the U.S. Mission had made to reduce its involvement were suddenly placed on hold.

In Vientiane, the agreement came under severe criticism by Souvanna Phouma's opponents, whom the U.S. continued to attempt to restrain. Lao parties (RLG and PL) were in charge of the lengthy negotiations that culminated in the ceasefire, so USG and the North's leaders were negotiating by proxy. The RLG accepted numerous compromises because of the Prime Minister's desire to achieve a settlement. The Pathet Lao had not wanted to sign any ceasefire that would have provided for foreign troop withdrawals without a political settlement. The view of some in the U.S. Embassy was that the terms of the agreement were the best that could have been hoped for while negotiating from the mid-February weak military position. Therefore, Souvanna, under pressure from USG and motivated by an earnest desire to unify the country and save it from further war, was shifting to a more neutralist position.

As of 31 March 1973, the number of U.S personnel in Laos was listed at 1177; civilian direct hires were 438; military

184-Army Attaché (ARMA) twenty-two, Air Attaché (AIRA) eight, project 404 137; Marine guards and U.S. Navy seventeen.

The order of battle included 60,000 (86,242; FAR/FAN 48,155, Lao irregular forces 15,889) government troops and 17,330 (15, 889) Thai irregulars. <sup>5</sup> The Thai soldiers were paid from the Department of Defense rather than CIA funds, but CIA continued as the disbursing agent.

The Lao were accumulating reserve stocks of ammunition, and delivery of additional aircraft was expected. <sup>6</sup> The RLAFF counted 171 fixed wing and rotary wing aircraft out of an authorized number of 184. (During the first quarter of 1973, there were 8,573 T-28 tactical air sorties conducted, 467 gunship-flaeship sorties, and 8,497 C-47/H-34 air transport sorties.)

Air America operated two C-46s, twenty UH-34s, nine C-123Ks, eight C-47s, and thirty-two aircraft which were Company owned and operated in Laos. (This probably included Udorn based Bells and S-58T helicopters.)

Further statistics revealed that 281,448 refugees were being supported in some manner under USAID auspices.

The air services costs over the past several years were shared by various users of U.S. contract aircraft (AAM/CASI) and some separate small helicopter contractors (Arizona).

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<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of State Message Text, 03/22/73. Actual Moose-Lowenstein numbers vary with those compiled in the 03/31/73 quarterly report on Laos. The next data's report would reflect integration of Lao irregulars into the FAR, something that had already begun. Different figures will be noted in parentheses or footnotes, and explained if necessary.

The Thai figures did not include 1,386 training in Thailand.

Author note: In addition to RLA figures cited, there was no idea or mention of the phantom soldiers that were certainly counted to inflate payrolls.

<sup>6</sup> Ten C-123K planes were transferred to the RLAFF from Air America stocks in January and Air America began training Lao aircrews and maintenance personnel, but the aircraft were still flown by Air America pilots.

On the other side of the ledger, enemy strength was estimated at 61,610 Vietnamese (total 108,500--this number excluded the enemy forces transiting the Trail system) and 29,665 Pathet Lao (35,000; in addition, there were 2,000 dissident neutralists). <sup>7</sup>

Friendly losses up to 31 March: 173 FAR/FAN troops were killed; 540 wounded. Lao irregulars lost 540 KIA and 1,203 WIA. Almost 300 Thai volunteers were killed and 1072 wounded.

All enemy losses, excluding those on the logistic Trails resulting from action of non-government forces were calculated at 2,106 killed, 2,622 estimated killed or wounded. <sup>8</sup>

There were 30,000 Chinese staged along major road systems in northern Laos (Military Region One). During the past year, construction had begun on a new road from Moung Sing toward Burma, another from Moung Sing to Nam Tha and from Nam Tha to the southwest, ending twenty miles from the end of the American-built road northeast from Ban Houei Sai. The roads were motorable, single lane, but not considered all-weather.

#### **THAILAND**

The Congressional visit to Thailand revealed that Thai leaders were uneasy because of the Vietnam settlement, the precarious military position of the Lao government, the critical Cambodian situation, and concern that the U.S was about to withdraw completely, leaving them to fend for themselves. The Thais were using the bases as bargaining chips for additional

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<sup>7</sup> The 35,000 number included 13,000 civilian personnel who performed military support functions such as village defense, transportation, and headquarters staff.

The 2,000 dissents included about 1,000 Khammouane (MR-3) neutralists.

<sup>8</sup> Despite the degree of difficulty involved, the 2,106 KIA number was considered firm and conservative. It included KIA and killed by air (KBA).



Map depicting mostly communist (Chinese) road infrastructure in Military Region One had been underway for years.  
CIA Bulletin, 10/30/73.

economic and military assistance. There was no indication that Thai military leadership would relax its firm hold on the political process. The country remained under martial law. Political parties were still banned and the legislative function was being performed by an assembly whose members were appointed by the government.

For months, there had been a marked increase in critical comment from Thai students and intellectuals. Among the issues pursued were U.S. use of Thai bases and Thai involvement in the Indochina war. The U.S. presence in Thailand was regarded by Thai leaders as a source of security at a time of apprehension over the future of Southeast Asia.

During the March period there were 44,406 U.S. military personnel in Thailand, an increase due to deployment of USMC air units to Nam Phong, and additional USAF units to counter the North's April 1972 offensive in South Vietnam. At that time, an airbase opened at Nam Phong and one reopened at Takhli. They remained active in order to enforce the Vietnam and Lao ceasefire agreements.

The USAF was located at seven Thai bases. There were 419 strike aircraft, fifty-six B-52s, and forty-three non-combat assets operating from Thai bases, not including some planes at Udorn which were involved in U.S. military assistance to Laos.

Thailand was still a site of major U.S. logistic support activity for military and paramilitary efforts in Laos and Cambodia. A new U.S. command, the U.S. Support Activities Group, was created and located, together with the 7th Air Force Command, at Nakhon Phanom.

Since late 1960, U.S. Army Special Forces units were present in Thailand conducting indigenous and extraterritorial

personnel training and operations. As the war in Laos moved into high gear, their training requirements increased proportionally.<sup>9</sup>

The USSF in Thailand performed some of the most varied duty assignment in the war. They worked in a friendly country, and except in the most remote regions, were largely immune from enemy attack.

One company was able to concentrate its teams on a mission-oriented basis. The 46th fielded ranger, SCUBA, HALO, reconnaissance, and other specialized detachments. They were authorized an aviation section.

After the February Lao ceasefire, cross-border operations were halted and the teams reoriented to training assignments.

At the time of the Congressional committee visit, the USA Special Forces listed 302 men divided among six detachments, located at nine places in Thailand. Thai and foreign irregular training was conducted jointly with Thai instructors at Nam Phong, Phitsanulok (Pitt's Camp), and Ban Nong Saeng. Company B training in counterintelligence operations took place at Nong Takoo, Nam Pung Dam, and Lampang. Company C sponsored advice and assistance at the Royal Thai Army Special Warfare Center Lopburi north of Bangkok training Cambodians.

A USAF advisory group was assigned to Don Muang. Personnel also served at Takhli, Kokethiem, Chiang Mai, Ubon, Udorn, Prachub, Kampong San, Korat, and Sattahip.

Increasing eleven percent from September 1971 to September 1972, communist insurgence (CI) was still a problem. The Thai increased efforts to combat the CI, and were constantly asking for more aid. CI was not considered a serious threat to Thai society near term, but could be if not brought under control.

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<sup>9</sup> In 1963, the Author helped deliver JUSMAAG personnel from Bangkok to many Special Forces bases scattered throughout Thailand. I was not privy to what went on during the meetings, but assumed they centered on fact-finding missions.



There were disproportionate numbers of government casualties compared to those of the CI during operations. The Thai required better organization and leadership. The insurgency provided a primary justification for continued U.S. military and economic assistance to Thailand.

The Thai government continued to provide support to the Chinese KMT, and they were employed as a counterinsurgency pacification force in northern Thailand, where RTA units failed to achieve targeted goals. <sup>10</sup>

### **CAMBODIA**

Sixty days after the Paris agreement signing, Cambodia became a central theater for the continuing Indochina war. The third Khmer offensive began on 10 February and lasted most of the month. The March-April offensive marked the most significant communist activity. Despite 7th USAF air activity of a daily fifty-eight B-52, thirty F-111, 142 other strikes, and eleven gunship sorties, the enemy managed to close all lines of communication into the capital at Phnom Penh. The political, military, and economic performance of the Lon Nol government had reached an all-time low.

The Moose-Lowenstein team visited the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, on 5 April. Their questions related to air operations were addressed with vague and general answers. Only days later did the team learn that embassy officials had been restricted as to what they could reveal to them about air operations. This included targets and details on air strikes.

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<sup>10</sup> KMT (Kuomintang): The remaining forces of Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese Army in Indochina after the Meo communists took control of China in 1949. Marrying women from various tribes, the men generally controlled the drug trade along the borders of Thailand, Burma, and Laos. Known as fierce fighters like the Meo, over the years, the KMT were sometimes used by the Agency for intelligence gathering, and special operations.

The team initially concluded that eighty percent of air strikes were targeted against Vietnamese LOCs, supplies, caches, and so forth. Only twenty percent were directed against Red Khmer insurgents, but these numbers were eventually reversed to reflect the true percentages.

General Haig visited Phnom Penh at the same time as the team. He informed Lon Nol that U.S economic assistance and military support would not be continued unless the premier allowed certain opposition political leaders into his government and curtailed activities of his brother. When the Americans departed Cambodia, there was no assurance that U.S. intervention would have an effect on the situation.

The Moose-Lowenstein's ensuing report on cooperation from the Phnom Penh Embassy was very critical, for by the spring the capital appeared to be in serious trouble. The city was surrounded, and the enemy had forced the forces Armees National Khmer Army to the perimeter of the capital. <sup>11</sup>

#### **IN CONCLUSION**

The writer tasked to compose details of the Moose-Lowenstein fact-finding visit to Southeast Asia wrapped up the conclusions for Congressional input stating:

*"The future course of events in Indochina seems to turn on the question of whether the 25-year struggle among the Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians will be pursued by military means or whether a political resolution is possible.*

*In Laos, communist forces are in such a strong position, and the government forces are so enfeebled, that the Vietnamese may be able to leave their PL allies to their own devices and*

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<sup>11</sup> Memorandum for the Record, Moose & Lowenstein Report Entitled "U.S. Air Operations in Cambodia-April 1973," 04/24/73. Earl Tilford.

*retain their use of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The first sign that they had made such a decision would be the formation of the Provisional Government of National Union.*

*It has always been said that without [the presence of] foreign forces, the Lao factions could work out their own destiny in a characteristically undefined Lao way. They might have done so in 1962 when the dividing lines between the government and Pathet Lao territory were about where they are now, or at any time since, but they were never given a chance. They may well have it now..."*<sup>12</sup>

### **POLAD**<sup>13</sup>

The following report briefly recapitulated U.S. participation in the Lao war as of April 1973.

*"Since the 1950s the United States has consistently supported the goal of an independent and neutral Laos. This policy was most recently expressed by Article 20 of the Vietnam agreement. This article commits North Vietnam to respect the 1954 and 1962 agreements on Laos and to refrain from using Laotian territory to encroach on the sovereignty and security of other nations. The Lao ceasefire agreement, reached separately by the Lao parties themselves on February 21, 1973, provides for an immediate in-place ceasefire, international inspection, establishment of a new coalition government, and withdrawal of all foreign forces within 60 days. Adherence to this agreement*

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<sup>12</sup> Report to Congress of the 28 May-19 April 1973 Moose-Lowenstein visit to Southeast Asia.

Another source included:

Shelby Stanton, *Green Berets at War: U.S. Army Special Forces in Southeast Asia 1956-1975*. (Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1985) 10, 284-285.

<sup>13</sup> POLAD: acronym for Foreign Policy Advisor Program. This program established interagency communications between the Department of State and the Department of Defense.

by the parties concerned would contribute greatly to the foundation of a stable and lasting peace in Laos.

Although the [U.S.] complied fully with the provisions of the 1962 Geneva Agreement, [NVN] never withdrew its forces or abandoned its scheme of subverting [the Accords]. In Laos as many as 100,000 [NVA] personnel engaged both in offensive combat against the Laotian government and moving supplies south through the Ho Chi Minh Trail [system]. While some elements were withdrawn in 1972 to participate in the invasion of South Vietnam, an estimated 80,000 remained in Laos and sought to eliminate the Lao government's military presence in Northern Laos and capture additional territory for the Hanoi-dominated Lao Patriotic Front (LPF).

In the face of continuing aggression from [NVN], Laos called for American assistance in its struggle for self-determination. With a population of less than three million and one of the least developed economies in the world, the country could not by itself resist Hanoi's armies. Consistent with our objectives for a neutral and independent Laos, the [U.S.] responded positively to the request of the Laotian government. Despite the magnitude of the [NVN] challenge, we made every effort to keep our presence to the minimum necessary to carry out our undertaking with our Laotian friends. For example, no U.S. military personnel have been assigned a ground combat role in Laos, and in fiscal year 1973 all U.S. spending for Laos was limited by law to 375 million.

Our assistance to the Kingdom of Laos has helped this country preserve its sovereignty in the face of North Vietnamese attacks. Matched by the tenacious defense by the people and army

*of Laos, our role contributed to the ceasefire agreement of February 21."* <sup>14</sup>

### **THE THIRD MAP UH-34D TRANSFER TO INDONESIA**

Beginning on 18 April, several Air America crews ferried four reconditioned H-34s to Jakarta, Indonesia under the USGs Military Assistance Program. Traveling through Thailand and Malaysia, the trip required several days with either refueling or RON stops at Don Muang, Bangkok, Hua Hin, Haad Yai, Thailand Penang Island, Alor Seltar Joher, Malaysia, Palembang, Sumatra, and Jakarta, Indonesia.

Some of the participants in the transfer were: Captains Hal Miller, who led the flight, Marius Burke, Duane Keele, Dick Theriault, Elmer Munsell, Emmet Sullivan, and first officer Doug Dexter. American Flight Mechanics included: Gaza Eiler, Bill Long, Steve Sickler, and Gary Gentz.

### **ICCS LOSS IN SOUTH VIETNAM**

Following the January Paris agreement, in order to monitor and implement the South Vietnamese ceasefire, Air America was awarded the International Commission of Control and Supervision (ICCS) contract to operate and maintain aircraft used to police the peace agreement. Twenty-nine aircraft were involved: twenty-two UH1H Bells, three Beech Volpars, and one C-46. A Porter, a Caribou, and another Volpar were on call. A number of crewmembers had to be hired to man the aircraft.

The main ICCS headquarters was based in Saigon with other operations in the regions of Hue, Da Nang, Pleiku, Phan Thiet,

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<sup>14</sup> Secretary of State William P. Rogers. Foreign Policy Report to Commander in Chief Pacific (CINCPAC) for POLAD, 04/17/73.



Manual refueling with wobble pumps from drums at Hua Hin, Thailand on the ferry trip down the western peninsula to Jakarta, Indonesia. Air America Personnel left to right: Steve Sickler, Gaza Eiler, Emmet Sullivan, Duane Keele, and Hal Miller.

Burke Collection.



Third refueling stop at Haad Yai on the lower southwestern peninsula of Thailand.

Burke Collection.



Reconditioned UH-34Ds parked in front of the Alor Setar, Malaysia, control tower, awaiting fuel to continue the trip to Jakarta, Indonesia.

Burke Collection.





Air America flight crews standing in front of the Alor Setar terminal. L-R Dick Theriault, Elmer Munsell, Hal Miller, Gaza Eiler, Gary Gentz, Filipino Flight Mechanic, and Steve Sickler.

Burke Collection.



RON site at Penang, Malaysia. Marius Burke's cockpit mate Doug Dexter, who added a great deal of color to the long trip to Indonesia playing his bagpipes.

Burke Collection.



Johor, the southernmost city in Malaysia.  
Burke collection.



A royal palace, center, at Johor, Malaysia.  
Burke Collection.





A hamlet on the western island of Sumatra, Indonesia.  
Burke Collection.



Landing at Palembang, Sumatra.  
Burke Collection.



A crew seeking shade from the intense heat.  
Burke Collection.





Trip's end at Jakarta, Indonesia,  
Burke Collection.



Bien Hoa, My Tho, and Can Tho. Each region contained team sites that numbered fifty. <sup>15</sup> As during previous ICC experiments in Southeast Asia, the ICCS was not respected by the enemy, and had little restraining effect on combat activities. <sup>16</sup>

On seven April, a two-aircraft flight was conducting a prearranged flight path, cleared by the ICC in advance by the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam (PRG). The area they were entering was considered controlled by the communists. However, both ICC helicopters were clearly marked with large yellow stripes around the fuselage, and large black ICCS letters on a white background.

Initial reports from the ICCS communications center in Saigon and DOD indicated that Bell UH-1H, 71-20115, <sup>17</sup> flown by Devoll, Hotchkiss, and Alforque, and carrying several ICC members, was impacted by a missile three minutes east of V-71 (Lao Bao). The Bell was escorted by another Air America crew (Captain Charles Osterman, Captain Terry Clark, Phillip Foley, and Valeriano Rosales) flying UH-1H 66-17006, who also carried ICCS members and two high ranking PRG liaison officers (the

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<sup>15</sup> *Air America Log*, Volume 7, #8, 1973.

<sup>16</sup> Wikipedia and Foreign Relations: The International Commission of Control and Supervision (ICCS) was created during the Vietnam War to replace the previously ineffective International Control Commission following the signing of the Paris Peace Accords on 27 January 1973. Except for Indonesians replacing neutral Indians, who did not want to participate in another fiasco, representatives were the same as during former ICC committees; Canadians, the West; Hungarian's and Poles, the communist factions.

The ICCS organization provided for a headquarters element of 116 per delegation, seven regional teams with four per delegation per team, twenty-six regional sites with two per delegation per team, and twelve point of entry sites with two per delegation per site.

The Protocol to the Paris Agreement detailed the ICCS functions: To supervise the ceasefire, the withdrawal of troops, the dismantlement of military bases, the activity at ports of entry, and the return of captured military personnel and foreign civilians.

<sup>17</sup> The Air America ZCZC, XOXO and historian Joe Leeker presents the aircraft number as stated in the incident account. The Dennis Regan account refers to the side number as 71-20117.



ICCS Huey flown and maintained by Air America personnel in South Vietnam. As were all ICCS designated aircraft, the Bells were clearly marked.

*Air America Log, Volume 7, #8, 1973.*

number and names of passengers were unknown at the time of the shooting). That was the final contact ICCS made with the aircraft that day. <sup>18</sup>

The following morning, PRG officials confirmed one helicopter was completely destroyed with all aboard killed, but the communists refused to identify the aircraft side number of the destroyed ship, or to reveal the status of individual passengers and crewmembers.

ICCS joint general staff representatives were driving from Da Nang to the crash site. Survivors were taken to Gio Linh and plans for the Bell recovery were unknown. A Huey crew was standing by for possible survivor retrieval or to perform other duties as required. <sup>19</sup>

A later more cohesive report from Dennis Ragan stated that two ICCS helicopters departed Da Nang in Quang Tri Province for Lao Bao with twelve to fifteen people. The flight had been airborne about fifteen minutes when the word arrived that their relief crews were onboard a landing C-46, and they should RTB Danang to effect a crew change. Since they had already been in the field for a week, and returning to Saigon seemed prudent and welcome, they returned to the base and switched crews.

Fresh crews consisting of Osterman, Clark, Rosales, and Foley took over 66-17006. They carried one Canadian, two Hungarians, one Indonesian, two Poles, and two PRG officers. The primary Bell, 71-20115, crewed by Devoll, Hotchkiss, and Alforque, carried two Canadians, three Poles, and two Indonesians.

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<sup>18</sup> Air America Operational Alert, XOXO, channeled through the entire Air America system, 04/07/73. As usual initial incident/accident reports provided sketchy detail and were often erroneous.

<sup>19</sup> Air America XOXO, 04/08/73. This report erroneously reported the wrong aircraft destroyed (71-20115 vs. 17006). It also wrongly reported the number of people and nationalities onboard 17006.

Twenty minutes after the C-46 departed for Saigon, garbled radio transmissions were heard on guard from a Bell crewmember. It sounded like they were in the Lao Bao valley and many SA-7 missiles were being fired at them from the rear.

20115 had received a direct hit. The aircraft crashed with only one survivor, American Phillip Foley, who incurred compressed vertebrae. Bell 66-17006 was damaged and conducted a successful forced landing. Following ICCS-PRG negotiations, the damaged Bell was released, repaired, and flown out of the crash site. <sup>20</sup>

## **BACK TO WORK**

Following a few days STO in Bangkok, we returned to Udorn, where multiple local training assignments awaited me. Since the Sam Neua mission was placed on hold, and April was almost devoid of Special Project work, I was back on a normal instructor and line pilot schedule. It was a nice break from the stressful nighttime project work that afforded me some quality time at home with the family, and I was able to mix with other pilots again. However, the long hours training pilots entailed working all day.

Because of his educational background and the new Company management structure, Larry Price was elevated from "Peter Pilot" to an Operations Engineer. <sup>21</sup> As this entitled Price to

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<sup>20</sup> XOXO, 04/08/73. There was some disparity between aircraft side numbers from the ZCZC and Ragan reports.

Dennis Ragan-dragan@msn.com)-recollection of events on 04/07/73 and other related documents of Bell helicopter 17006's SA-7 downing.

Author Note: The incident reminds one of a similar perfidious incident that occurred on the Plain of Jars in November 1962, when Fred Riley's C-123 was ruthlessly shot down by Pathet Lao AAA gunners when on approach to Xieng Khouang airfield.

<sup>21</sup> Al Cates indicated that Larry Price's nose bled while flying. Neither I nor Wayne Knight (12/30/00 email) could substantiate such an event.

upgrade training to PIC status in the Twinpac, on the seventh, using Papa Hotel Bravo, we commenced all day training. (Five hours, five landings.) Deak Kennedy was our Flight Mechanic for the day.

Assigned Papa Hotel Bravo, upgrade (SIC) training continued on the ninth with Chuck Frady (DOH 09/16/70). This was Chuck's second employment stint with Air America. During the first, he had lived with his family in the same Nong Khai Highway house, in which we currently resided. Marital problems had ensued, which led to his departure from Southeast Asia for a year, and a divorce. <sup>22</sup>

Tom Grady (DOH 05/29/68) was the second pilot I was assigned to train that day. After conducting ground emergency procedure training instruction with both men in the pilot briefing room, we went to the flight line for preflight inspection and indoctrination. Frady had more H-34 time, but both men had amassed considerable helicopter experience, and as they seemed knowledgeable in those systems, I did not anticipate any problems. Moreover, they had attended Rex Morgan's excellent ground school.

Anticipating a long hot day, I flew with Frady first. Stressing basic Twinpac maneuvers and demonstrable emergencies in the grassy infield and in traffic patterns, I logged four hours IP with Chuck. This required all morning and part of the afternoon after lunch.

Later in the afternoon Tom Grady and I flew one local

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<sup>22</sup> Author Note: Chuck Frady and I later worked together at the Helicopter Charter and HCI FAR 135 commercial operation at Moisant (renamed Armstrong) Airport Kenner, Louisiana; Chuck functioned as Director of Operations. I was Chief Pilot. A heavy smoker, Frady succumbed to lung cancer complications in the 1980s.

training session. (One plus fifty IP.) I liked Tom instantly.<sup>23</sup> Upgrade training continued the next morning in Bravo with Frady. (One plus forty IP.)

Wednesday, after a short FCF of twenty-five minutes, I conducted Phil Payton's proficiency check in Papa Hotel Echo. Phil Velasquez was our Flight Mechanic. (Two plus fifteen.) In the afternoon, I flew with Tom Grady for two plus twenty hours. Upgrade training continued on the twelfth. After a fifty-minute FCF on Papa Hotel Echo, Frady and I flew two hours. Later Grady and I worked for two plus ten hours.

Two days later, with all the Twinpac training under their belts, it was time to venture into the field. Grady, Len Bevan, and I launched north in Papa Hotel Bravo. After landing at The Alternate, fueling, and loading passengers and goods, we continued "around the horn" to Bouam Long.<sup>24</sup> Since enemy probes had substantially increased in the area, we were tasked to move the bullets, beans, and bandages necessary for the site's survival to dozens of high ground defensive positions ringing the site. Leading the way, I flew forty sling loads or landings, with Tom conducting a similar number. Landing late at Long Tieng, we ate in the Customer mess and RON in the two-man Porta-camp trailers on SKY hill. (Nine hours.)

Sharing the wealth, the next day, Chuck Frady replaced Grady. We returned to Site-32 to continue the resupply requirements of stockpiled goods. After eight landings (Frady

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<sup>23</sup> EW Knight Email, 12/30/00. Wayne recalls: "Tom Grady was a really nice person. He was something of a philanthropist, always forthcoming with money when someone's house burned down. He transitioned into S-58T's and Special Project operations very near the end of the Southeast Asia experience."

Author Note: Grady, later a pilot for the Los Angeles Fire Department, was killed in California when another helicopter pilot landed on top of his ship at night.

<sup>24</sup> Around the horn: This entailed flight to west of the dangerous Plain of Jars.

conducting an equal number), Bravo belched mightily, and we returned early to Site-20A for inspection and whatever compressor stall maintenance could be performed in the field. (Six plus forty.)

Whatever maintenance was accomplished on the fifteenth was sufficient, and we spent the entire next day working pads at Bouam Long. (Nine plus twenty-five, forty landings.)

After terminating at The Alternate, I managed a last light flight to Udorn on C-130, 54386. A twenty-eight-minute flight, it certainly was a leisurely way to travel.

Following a day off, I attended a comprehensive four-day ground school encompassing UH-34D/S-58T systems and auto-stabilizing equipment training. The classes consisted of detailed instruction conducted by a humorous instructor who knew his subjects well. After four days, for the first time, I departed with a far better understanding of the very complicated ASE system.

*"...I do think we will see more controls soon to control the rate of inflation. The market will probably go down if more tight money is the policy...rumbles of a recession this fall...*

*Today is Tuie's birthday...Rick has a week off during Easter. It will probably be a madhouse around here as the boys are coming into their own. Tuie has been taking them swimming and Rick can swim a bit now. Peter is not afraid [of the water] but must have more confidence before he sheds his inflatable items...*

Letter Home, 04/22/73

I was assigned a sterile standby at home on the 23rd. Then, after a long drought of no flying, I was scheduled upcountry on Friday, the 27th. I deadheaded to The Alternate on 405 (one plus thirty-three) and joined Chuck Frady and Gary Gentz on Papa

Hotel Bravo, but it was late and I only managed to fly two plus thirty hours and five landings.

The next morning after breakfast, we walked down the hill to the macadam parking area, where Gentz already had Bravo prepared for the day's work. Assignments were generally local, and I conducted twenty landings during nine hours of logged flight time.

Sunday, I joined Buzz Biaz and Bill Long on Papa Hotel Echo to work at Bouam Long. In the struggle to reinforce and supply defensive pads, work was still backed up. Consequently, I made forty mixed sling load drops and actual landings. We were recalled and arrived at Udorn about dark. (Ten hours.)

## **CHINOOKS**

Busy with his new management job, and waiting for the Sam Neua ADR clearance, Wayne Knight only flew four times in April.

On the ninth he and Tom Moher conducted a one hour thirty-minute FCF on Chinook 816016.

Late the next afternoon, Wayne and Lloyd Higgins flew 815828 south to the Nam Phong (T-712) Special Forces and Marine base, where they accomplished uninterrupted simulated instrument training. (One plus forty-five, One plus ten night.)

Thirteen days later, Knight and Bengston conducted Special Project training in 816016. (Two hours.) Preparing for a mission, on the 28th, Wayne and Ed Reid flew one plus twenty Special Project training.

On the final day of April, I returned to Special Project work, but this time it was programed for the Panhandle. After Hank Edwards, Deak Kennedy, and I checked in the facility at 1205 hours, organized our mission gear, and inspected and loaded Papa Hotel Alpha, we received a briefing at the White House. The mission entailed escorting and providing SAR coverage to an Air



America Chinook crew tasked to retrieve troops infiltrated to the Yankee pad on the third week of March.

Slated for two-night extractions, we launched for Savannakhet in the mid-afternoon and had supper at the Air America hostel. The extractions occurred without incident, and after RTB Udorn, we blocked out at 2220 hours. (Six hours, three plus twenty-five night, one landing.)

**R**ecriminations from the Company's January success in eliminating the Far East Pilot Association's (FEPA) viability to negotiate future contracts continued to plague us. I was aware that my Senior Instructor Pilot position would be eliminated in favor of designated program managers for each helicopter category, so when Marius Burke delivered the coup de gras, I was not surprised. Essentially, we had reverted to the bad old days of management types gallingly saying at will, "If you don't like it, quit."

*"As you are aware, the Company, as part of its reorganization is doing away with all SIP positions. This change will take place effective 1 May 1973.*

*This change is in no way a reflection of your performance. I would like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation for the outstanding job you have done in your capacity as SIP/S58T for the last five and a half months.*

*The many extra hours of preparation and effort expended by you have resulted in a vast improvement in the knowledge and professionalism on the part of pilots in the S58T program. It is gratifying to know we have people of your caliber who can be depended upon to perform in such an exemplary manner as you have performed.*

*Should future requirements dictate the need for similar positions we would like to call upon you for such services. In the meantime, we wish to continue utilizing your talents as an instructor pilot.*

*Thank you for a job well done.*

*Marius Burke*

CP/RW NTD UTH" <sup>1</sup>

## **RETURN TO ADR WORK**

On the first of May, Knight and Hutchison conducted an FCF and LORAN refresher cross country on Papa Hotel Alpha in anticipation of the Sam Neua mission. (One plus fifty.) They also flew Chinook 815864 on a T-28 recovery to Nam Phong (Tango-712). After delivering the plane, Hutch failed to move off to the side before pickling the lifting devices. Wayne was very disappointed when the heavy wires and eye bolts penetrated the T-28 cockpit greenhouse. <sup>2</sup>

Tuesday, Hank Edwards, Deak Kennedy, Chuck Low, and I resumed a short afternoon warmup ADR training session with XW-PHD. This likely included using the dummy ADR and the Chicago Grip. (One hour, one landing.)

Crewing CH-47 816016, Wayne and Hutch continued Special Project training around Udorn. (One hour.)

The next day Wayne, Deak, and I were selected for a VIP cover role with Papa Hotel Alpha for Agency honchos General Vernon Walters and Bill Colby, who were scheduled for a high-level meeting at Long Tieng. After RON at Takhli on the 2nd, flying Twin Otter 74M, Jim Pearson and Pete Parker returned to Udorn, boarded the passengers and transported them to Long Tieng.

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<sup>1</sup> CP RW NTD UTH: This acronym stood for Chief Pilot Rotary Wing Northern Thailand Division Udorn. My reversion (employee number 05942) amounted to a pay cut and was effective 1 May. This was made official in a Personnel Division notification of change in salary/status that I received on 12 May.

During the organizational changes, Bill Hutchison was elevated to Assistant Chief Pilot Chinooks/S-58T; Hal Miller became ACP of the UH-34D/UH1H programs.

Wayne Knight Email, 01/02/01. Wayne believed both assignments were appropriate and was involved in the inception.

<sup>2</sup> Wayne Knight Email, 01/02/01.

From the Customer quarters on SKY hill, I observed Walters and the Washington group going to and entering a building I had never had the privilege to enter. Our job completed, we blocked in at 1510. (Three plus thirty, one landing.)

Anticipating another Sam Neua ADR mission, on four May, Pearson and Ted Mauldin continued their long day checking Site-32 for security and availability of fuel. They also reported general weather conditions in upper Military Region Two. (Seven hours, two plus forty-four night, five landings.)

Because of my previous failures in successfully completing the ADR job, there was some talk, and a little pressure, to allow someone else to attempt the insertion. This fact was totally unknown to me until Hutch semi-tactfully broached the subject during a briefing in Buddy's office. I was surprised, and immediately objected to Hutch's obvious self-serving statement. In my mind, I had demonstrated all the attributes the mission required. The ability to arrive at the site, conduct the work under duress, and return my crew and machine home safely; I had a good sight picture of the hilltop tree from a distance, and wasted no time hovering over the "only tree." I earnestly believed that with overdue good luck, I could successfully complete the job. Apparently, Rogers and Knight also believed in me as the primary unit commander and no more was said about the subject. <sup>3</sup>

Because of continued enemy incursion into Laos and requirement for scarce, factual intelligence, authorization to continue the Sam Neua ADR mission arrived from Langley Headquarters. Accordingly, three crews gathered in operations before noon on Friday: Casterlin, Zube, Kennedy, and Low in Papa

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<sup>3</sup> Wayne Knight Email, 12/31/00. Wayne thinks I was wrong about a push to replace me by Hutch. He professes to know nothing about it. "So far as Buddy and I were concerned you were it."

Hotel Delta in the primary role; Lloyd, Hutchison, and Long as the SAR, cover; and Wayne, Cates flying Papa Hotel Bravo in a backup function. <sup>4</sup>

During the White House briefing, "Moon Man" Wally Smith assured us that the moon phase would be favorable to illuminate our work site.

A PI briefing revealed that latest aerial photos failed to reveal the ADR in the tree. Therefore, Deak would have to descend on the hoist cable in semi-darkness to find and evaluate the ADR's condition. In order to further assess the device for incapacitating damage, during a hands-on session using a spare ADR in the laboratory, Deak was thoroughly briefed by technicians about critical items to look for using his IR flashlight, goggles, and feel. Then, if he judged the relay to be relatively undamaged, he was to hook it up for redeployment in the tree. If he deemed the unit not in complete working order, we were instructed to bring it home. It seemed there were a lot of ifs involved in the mission, and an ultimate element was never verbally broached.

It had been thirty-six days since we last journeyed to Phou Nia. We examined current aerial photos for evidence of enemy activity in the vicinity of the ADR, but saw no indication of human presence. Nevertheless, there was some apprehension, for we did not know what to expect at the tree and, after the last incident, expected the worst.

Flying Otter 74M, Jim Pearson, Pete Parker, et al. would provide the overhead control platform for long-range radio communications, weather conditions, and ADR signal alignment,

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<sup>4</sup> Al Cates logbook entries for 05/4-5/73. Back from H-500P training in the States, Al had a local proficiency check in Papa Hotel Delta with Bill Hutchison and Chuck Low. (One plus forty.)

should the mission progress that far. (Three plus sixteen, one plus thirty-seven night, two landings.)

As a harbinger of what we would encounter that evening, two ships in the group encountered a line of heavy thunderstorms a few miles west of the Sam Tong area. Penetrating a fringe of the weather, the crews were confronted with heavy rain, large downdrafts, and abundant lightning. Using LORAN, which worked well in the electrical storm, they "sort of" corrected tracks and monitored aircraft separation. They made little attempt to limit maximum altitude and concentrated on maintaining a level blade track without incurring descent. They eventually exited the storm cell at 13,000 feet MSL somewhere north of Moung Soui. Knight noted that the mountains were more beautiful than usual. (Five plus twenty-five, two plus twenty-five night, one ten AI.)<sup>5</sup>

We arrived at Bouam Long at about dinner time. When Pearson relayed that weather was bad and becoming worse throughout the entire region, to avoid having three tempting static targets RON at Site-32, we were recalled. Navigating our way around numerous storms, we obtained vectors from the Brigham Control GCI unit and blocked out at 2108 hours. (Five plus thirty-three, two plus thirty-three night.)

Crews were back in the same barrel the next day. Except for an aircraft change (Knight/Cates/Gaza Eiler in PHA), we were essentially the same cohesive unit, consisting of primary, secondary, a backup ship, and crews. We still did not know what to expect at the target, but were anxious to complete the job, and move on to another project.

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<sup>5</sup> EW Knight Emails, 12/31/00, 06/26/00. Although we often encountered en route weather during these missions, I do not recall this incident and surmise that I circumnavigated the storms, or departed for Bouam Long at a different time.  
Jim Pearson FEPA logbook, 04/04/73.

Jim Pearson and Pete Parker were again our support unit in 74M. After we were established at LS-32, they reported when it was advisable to launch on the mission.

It was dark when we rolled down the runway. As usual, Zube was accurate in navigating us east and then north to the tree. With the crew on high alert, I whipped into a low hover over the tree and turned to face south for an immediate departure, if that should become necessary. However, all appeared calm. As pre-briefed by PI, the entire tree canopy was found devoid of any man-made device. We could not observe the ground, so Deak hooked his Chicago Grip to the hoist cable, and Chuck manipulated the wire during a slow descent to the ground amid wildly moving branches. Although with limited vision, my goggles allowed me to observe light from Kennedy's IR-configured flashlight. It seemed like he was on the ground a long time before he excitedly reported that no ADR was in sight. This was an unexpected and surprising turn of events. It meant only one thing--the enemy had discovered, dismantled, and removed it. It was blatantly obvious that after so much time, effort, and treasure expended, our operation had been blown.

Nervous, feeling exposed, Deak wanted to leave immediately. I concurred. Potentially naked, we had spent too much time hovering and were certainly subject to ambush, mines, or any other devices calculated by the enemy to deter us from invading their backyard.

Tension mounted as Chuck slowly reeled Deak up and into the cockpit. Without an ADR in the tree canopy, it made no difference how we departed, so I added power, rotated forward, and stayed low to maintain the masking facade.

Like the *Casey at the Bat* poem, there "was no joy in Mudville, and we were a glum crew on the trip home. Obviously, the mission could be classified as an abject failure, and we

were back to square one in planning and operations. Actually, I was not all that upset, for we had exposed ourselves too many times working in the same place. Odds were that, sooner or later, we would have encountered severe trouble, something I did not care to think about.

Knight and Cates had departed Bouam Long early for Udorn, and Wayne was in the hushed AB-1 communications room after word of the missing ADR was revealed. (Five plus thirty-five, two plus fifty night, thirty-five minutes AI.) <sup>6</sup> He equated the atmosphere to that of a dismal funeral wake.

While the crew of 74M remained in the region to check the viability of the tap transmitter (six plus thirty-four, three twelve night, two landings), <sup>7</sup> we blocked in at 2300 hours. (Seven plus fifty-five, four plus fifty-five night, three landings.)

Amid the deep gloom at AB-1, the debriefing revealed that high level decisions had to be made as to further attempts to emplace another ADR in the Sam Neua region. Because of the recent development, and a still functioning phone tap, it was obvious that another line-of-sight tree would have to be discovered to accommodate a relay device. <sup>8</sup>

## **JAY ALLEN**

Customers began leaving Southeast Asia about this time. Air America school teacher Jay Allen bought Chuck "White Top"

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<sup>6</sup> EW Knight Email, 12/31/00. Monitoring the radio at Site-32, Wayne and Al did not know how long Deak was on the hoist, only that time in the area was becoming agonizingly protracted. They were getting some updates from the Otter crew.

<sup>7</sup> Jim Pearson FEPA log entry for 04/05-6/73.

<sup>8</sup> Although the thought, "I told you so," coursed through my brain, I said nothing, as even a brain-dead idiot could predict the eventual outcome of returning to the same insertion spot so many times.



Campbell's car for 200 dollars. Originally shipped from Kansas, the vehicle was a 1963 two door Bell-Air Chevrolet equipped with a 283 horsepower V-8 engine.

Dead rats were discovered under the back seat. The foul-smelling rodents had apparently been there for years. Allen thought Campbell must have been so used to the stench of death that he did not notice it. As a result, Allen had to drive with the windows rolled down.

One day, while driving on the main road, Jay was run off the road, and half into a ditch, by a large ten-wheeled Isuzu truck driver. Jay looked up at the driver, held his hand out of the window and flipped him "the bird." Several people were standing along the street and saw the finger pointing to the sky. In perfect unison, all the heads turned at once to look at what the farang was pointing at, which caused Jay to burst into laughter.

The automobile had both Joint Liaison Department (JLD) and Air America stickers on the windshield. When going into the Air Force base, the gate guards thought he was mysterious--perhaps a CIA employee. A tag indicated he was an instructor, not a teacher. He played this as far as he could. At close of business in June 1974, and after I had departed Udorn, he tested the JLD sticker and went on the compound. About a month later, Bob Leonard told him to take the sticker off, as he was not with JLD.<sup>9</sup>

### **SOUTHERN LAOS SPECIAL PROJECT OPERATIONS**

Despite the demoralizing failures in upper Military Region Two, we immediately switched to night phases of road watch work

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<sup>9</sup> Jay Don Allen Email.

that entailed delivering troops to forward denied areas close to enemy LOCs.

From ground and aerial reconnaissance intelligence, U.S. analysts were aware that communist leaders were violating the ceasefire agreement by continued heavy use of the Ho Chi Minh Trail system. Therefore, the U.S. Embassy Vientiane authorized another Commando Raider mission on the Tchepone crossroads.

Like the March Mugia mission, a single Chinook crew was tasked to insert sixty troops from a hover into a high, remote jungle-impacted ridgeline north of the Tchepone valley. Performed in the dark from a hover, the men would individually hook Chicago Grips to the cargo winch cable paying out from the cabin section. Then they would be reeled to the ground in an accelerated process, calculated to deliver all 60 men during a single descent.

Of course, practice was required to ensure familiarity and qualification with the grip. Some of this training was performed at Udorn, and on the sixth, Knight and Hutchison conducted team training using mission ship 815828. (Two plus forty-five night.)

After the crew of 828 repositioned the troops to Nong Saphong (LS-235), at the remote base northwest of Savannakhet, on the 7th, organizing and practice egress continued. The cable was color marked for correct grip attachment, and the men were briefed and re-briefed on the correct technique.

In anticipation of conducting the mission the following night, the Chinook crew RON at the Lima-39 Air America hostel. (Four plus fifty-five, one plus fifty night.)

AB-1 finally heeded my pleas for additional training and crew coordination. That same day, Al Cates, Larry Price, Tom Neis, Gary Gentz, and Chuck Low crewed Papa Hotel Delta early to

PS-44. <sup>10</sup> I deadheaded. (One plus twenty-five.) There were many agendas to pursue: Rogers wanted us to remain fairly proficient for any possible reentry into Sam Neua; also, the Vinh tap had suddenly ceased sending information. The number two relay north of Thakhet was the suspected culprit, and needed to be checked and possibly replaced. In addition, there were cover or escort requirements for CH-47 Chinook operations. We had our own road watch mission to perform the following night, and new crewmembers had to be familiarized with night operations and trained to an adequate level of proficiency for all mission-required and crew coordination techniques. <sup>11</sup>

Alternating cockpit crew members, we moved directly into day and night training sessions stressing canned LORAN navigation, NVG usage, and wooden ADR relay deployment. (Six plus forty-five, four plus ten night, ten landings).

Two missions were programmed for Military Region Three on the night of the eighth: the single aircraft Chinook insertion near the Tchepone valley, and a two-aircraft S-58T infil in foothills seventy-three nautical miles northeast of Savannakhet.

Wayne and Hutch positioned to the Nong Saphong site northwest of Savannakhet in daylight. The mission-oriented men were again briefed on Chicago Grip usage, and scrambled up the Chinook ramp into the cargo section at dark. With Lloyd Higgins and crew providing escort part way to the target in an S-58T, a

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<sup>10</sup> Al Cates May 1973 logbook entries. Al would spend most of the next two weeks at PS-44 flying with Captains Hank Edwards and Tom Grady. Flight Mechanics varied between Chuck Low, Gary Gentz, and Deak Kennedy.

<sup>11</sup> Perhaps someone had said something derogatory, or possibly suspecting a cargo cabin crew foul-up (particularly targeting Deak Kennedy). Therefore, Rogers wanted new men trained with NVGs, and assessed during day and night ADR operations. I was certain that my crew had performed the absolute best they could considering the circumstances. I did not agree with Rogers' theory regarding Deak, but I had to comply with his direction.

normal track was flown toward Mugia Pass, followed by a dog-leg south along a remote ridgeline system toward Tchepone. While Wayne hovered at sixty feet over the landing zone that was covered by dense foliage, the cabin crew began assisting troops hooking their grips to the cargo cable.

Despite previous training, the unloading process was prolonged and tedious, requiring more than a twenty-minute hover to complete. There were no incidents except for that caused by rotor downwash. Through a green field from the goggles, Wayne observed some of the troops being blown over after disengaging from the cable. He recalled that it was surreal watching little green objects tumbling about on the ground through waving grass, bushes, and small trees. The crew and 828 recovered reasonably early at Udorn. (Four hours night.) <sup>12</sup>

During mid-afternoon, I repositioned Papa Hotel Delta to the Lima-39 airport. Just back from home leave, Scratch Kanach and his crew, designated primary, would deliver the road watch team. My favorite navigator and second pilot, Dan Zube, would act as Kanach's navigator. Larry Price, with whom I had never flown on a mission, occupied the left seat.

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<sup>12</sup> Since we maintained radio silence, as part of the Special Project flight following SOP, the LORAN track for missions was always closely monitored at AB-1. Knight Emails, 12/30/00, 12/31/00, 07/17/01, 05/12/73, 05/13/73, 05/15/17. When Wayne and Hutch RTB Udorn that night, they learned that Hutch had made a substantial LORAN navigation error and the troops had been discharged thirty miles closer to Tchepone than was originally intended. When this was pointed out, Wayne commented, "Good they wouldn't have to hike so far to their objective." Not amused, Buddy was quite upset and concerned about Hutch's boo-boo, fearing the noise might have alerted the enemy. However, the mission goal was accomplished. Undetected by enemy forces, the strike unit attacked the regional Vietnamese command center near Tchepone, and successfully exfiltrated west to friendly lines near Mounq Phalane. The sixty individual grips were never recovered, but they were considered relatively inexpensive and expendable.

We consumed an early supper at the Air America hostel, returned to the airfield, and were in the air at dark. <sup>13</sup> I assumed a general heading to the east toward the target area. Before long, Larry corrected me. I had other things on my mind, and when I continued to fly the wrong heading (about thirty degrees off), he corrected me again, pointing to the heading indicator, and sarcastically saying, "Fly 030 degrees, not 360 degrees." It was not the fact that I was wrong, but the tone of his voice that annoyed me when a gentle reminder would have achieved the same result, and been infinitely more tactful. I was roiled. At that point, the mission was over for me. I wanted to abort the mission, but could not.

Not a particularly friendly person, Price's personality presented what might be characterized as one approaching that of a dull toad. We had always prided ourselves on matching compatible crews, who would be amicable cockpit mates no matter what the situation. Now, with our input on missions and those who participated largely diminished, we had lost the ability to pick and choose our crews. Price had never been selected by us for project work, and we knew very little about him. He was just another person, like Rip Green, who had appeared out of nowhere.

As an IP, I attempted to be impartial, judging only a pilot's performance, not his personality. However, despite attempting to maintain an open mind about individuals I trained, I never felt comfortable with, or enjoyed flying with Price, and he might have realized this. Moreover, as his recent elevation to a management position attested that Larry was a climber, and perhaps because of his exalted position resented me as only a line pilot, but someone in command. Yes, crew selection for this

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<sup>13</sup> I was not aware of any such requirement, but we might have provided a secondary back-up to the Chinook's SAR ship.

mission had been a very poor choice. Call it bad chemistry, karma, or such.

I continued to fume throughout the rest of the mission, and vowed never to fly with Price again. It shouldn't have, but the incident ruined my concentration on the task ahead, for all I could think about was the guy in the left seat, and his perceived lack of respect. In my estimation, I did not even perform a good job covering Scratch, and this could have been dangerous.

From altitude, with the benefit of NVGs, using Scratch's hover and landing lights as a guide, I monitored his approach and landing at the landing zone. Then, with the team safely on the deck, we established a course for PS-44, where we RON. (Four plus five, one forty night.) <sup>14</sup>

Day-night training continued on the ninth. Tom Grady, Low, and Gentz filled out our crew requirement. In contrast to Price, Grady, a nice easy-to-get-along-with individual was a breath of fresh air. After eating lunch at the Pakse hostel, we shuttled groceries and other goods to the base. Then we continued LORAN, practice ADR, and NVG training. (Six plus fifty, three plus fifteen night.)

The next day, using 815828, Knight and Higgins were tasked to retrieve troops at the March insertion Yankee pad south of Mugia. As a two-part mission, we were first assigned to act in a SAR role for the Chinook, and then participate in an ADR replacement north of Thakhet. The Chinook crew launched from Udorn, and we staged from Savannakhet. We were not briefed together, and like the Vinh tap undertaking, only knew the general area of operation. Coordinates would be forthcoming

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<sup>14</sup> When I returned to Udorn, with Price present, and without going into detail, I informed Wayne that I never wanted to be paired on a mission with him again. Nothing more was said, but my request was honored.

should they become necessary in an emergency. Since the Chinook and Twinpac were incompatible as to speed, it was not feasible to fly together, so, during the mission we orbited in an area halfway to the landing zone.

The LAWS hostile radar detector was triggered on the Chinook instrument panel during the mission. Wayne descended to an altitude where the signal was eliminated, and the mission proceeded without further incident. The troops were offloaded at PS-44, where the Chinook crew RON. (Five plus ten, three plus fifty night.) <sup>15</sup>

With our jobs half accomplished, we returned to Lima-39 to refuel and await Scratch's launch from PS-44 with the ADR. When Scratch made contact with Church Bell in the Customer radio room, we departed to join him loosely on the way to the ADR two location. The weather was unworkable, so we returned to PS-44. Scratch and crew RON there, but because of the overflow caused by the Chinook crew, we were advised to pop down to Pakse for what little remained of the early morning. (Seven plus fifty, four twenty night, ten landings.)

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<sup>15</sup> EW Knight Emails, 01/01/01, 07/17/01, 05/12/73, 05/13/73, 05/15/73.

Racpass: Prior to the mission, Knight's cockpit crew attended a sophisticated briefing at the White House in which various enemy radar coverages were conveyed, revealing safe altitudes that would avoid detection. Altitude layers were displayed on top of each other. Each succeeding layer displayed the type of radar threat they might encounter at that altitude. Some layers were much thicker than others. The information was considered highly accurate and a lot of work was performed preparing the material. In today's computer age, a layered three-dimensional (3-D) display would have been far easier to display on a screen.

As an example of Racpass' benefit: one might fly through Mugia Pass at 2,500 feet and avoid radar detection, while being detected at 2,750 feet.

We had abandoned installing the LAWS equipment in the Twinpac long ago as it was not pertinent to our Special Project work, and we had not attended any top secret Racpass briefings.

I slept late, enjoyed a late breakfast at the Air America hostel, and then flew with Grady and Gentz to the hilltop base for a briefing and some minor work leading to another ADR deployment attempt that night. (Three plus thirty, five landings.)

The weather report remained negative. The mission was scrubbed, so I left Delta at LS-444 and deadheaded home on Twin Otter N774M, blocking in at 2100 hours. (One plus thirty-five.) I did not fly for the next sixteen days.

### **EMMET KAY**

On 7 May the final American civilian contract pilot was captured and incarcerated in Laos. <sup>16</sup>

Captain Kay, a Hawaiian by birth, had worked as a Pilatus Porter pilot for Continental Air Service International (CASI) out of Vientiane since 1970. While flying a mixed six-man reconnaissance-observation team to the Phu Cum (LS-50) area, Emmet conducted a forced landing north of the Plain of Jars. Circumstances of his downing were obscured by later statements from the pilot, who claimed he was hit by small arms fire, and by two Meo passengers who indicated that the pilot became disoriented and, after circling for a long time, ran out of fuel.

All the men were eventually captured and marched to individual prisons. Kay was taken to a large cave complex in the Sam Neua Valley, where he was allowed special privileges denied

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<sup>16</sup> CASI Porter pilot Ernie Brace was captured in the Beng Valley in 1965 and ended up in the Hanoi Hilton until released with other POWs.



other POWs. He was eventually released in September 1974. <sup>17</sup>

During early June, an article appeared in the *United Press International* (UPI) regarding Emmet Kay's disposition. When valid and reliable facts were not available, journalists often concocted outright lies or half-truths for publication. Despite this, the article might be of some redeeming interest to readers.

*"Civilian pilot Emmet Kay, the first confirmed American prisoner of war (POW) in Laos since last February's ceasefire there was the victim of a shadowy war the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has fought in and financed for a decade.*

*Details surrounding Kay's work and his capture are as cloudy as the war itself and on the broadest outlines are visible.*

*The company [CASI] he worked for says he didn't fly for the CIA. A knowledgeable congressional investigator said the flight may have been paid for on paper by another U.S. agency, but the majority of such flights were actually for the CIA.*

*In the Lao capital of Vientiane, officials said Kay was on a routine mission, ferrying at least four CIA recruited guerrilla soldiers when his small prop plane went down 7 May over communist territory in bad weather while en route to a Lao government outpost at Bouam Long.*

*Congressional reports suggest Kay was one of perhaps more than 500 Americans working for contract airlines and carrying supplies and irregular troops hired by the CIA to fight the communists in Laos. The CIA support began in 1962.*

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<sup>17</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 402, 407 FN #9.  
Internet: *Homecoming 2 Project*. Biography, Kay, Emmet James SR.  
Internet: miafacts.  
Edward DeLong, UPI, *Emmet Kay's Association with CIA*.

*Kay worked for Continental Air Services [International-CASI], distant subsidiary of Continental Airlines. His capture was disclosed after Pathet Lao officials claimed 1 June to have captured an American major. Although Kay is a civilian, the communists said he was a military pilot.*

*The State Department acknowledged Friday [8 June] that officials from the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane had been meeting with communist Pathet Lao officials to discuss terms for Kay's release.*

*A spokesman for Continental Airlines in California contacted Saturday said Kay had worked for CASI in Laos for about four years.*

*He came from Honolulu, went to high school and learned to fly in Honolulu. He was a co-pilot for Aloha Airlines for about eight years and then operated his own air charter in Micronesia before going with CASI.*

*CASI operates from headquarters in Vientiane, usually flying missions under contract to USAID.*

*About 90 of its 500 employees in Laos are U.S. citizens, and it does about six million dollars of business a year with USG,*

*It did no business with the CIA [a bold-face lie]; Air America is the CIA's airline. But congressional investigator, Richard Moose, sent to Laos three times to probe the secret war for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has reported that CASI is one of three charter carriers doing work for the CIA." <sup>18</sup>*

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<sup>18</sup> Edward DeLong, *UPI, Emmet Kay's Association with CIA*, published circa early June 1973.

The number of airline companies working in Laos presented an illusion of competition for public consumption, when contracts and funds actually came out of the same USG pocket (CIA, USAID, DOD).

**JARINA**

While I was standing-by at home on the fifteenth, Captain Mike Jarina deadheaded to The Alternate on Twinpac Papa Hotel Bravo. (One plus twenty.) He replaced the PIC of Bell 204B 13F and joined Mike Barksdale and Bobby Barrow. They supplied defensive positions at and around the Sala Phu Khoun Route-7/13 road junction. (Five plus ten.) The crew then RON on SKY hill in the Portacamp trailers.

The next day, after switching Cliff Hendrix for Barksdale, Mike flew far to the east to work at Nam Houi. A refugee site, LS-360 was located twenty-four miles southeast of Tha Thom and twelve miles south of Moug Moc (LS-46) They then RON at 20A. (Eight hours, ten minutes night.)

Thursday the crew worked locally around Long Tieng and at Ban Na. Hendrix was relieved. Late in the day, Jarina, a Bell IP, provided Greenway with a fifty-one-minute route check in 35F. Gary Gentz became Mike's Flight Mechanic. (Eight plus twenty.)

The route check continued on the 18<sup>th</sup>. (Eight plus eight.) Relieved at the end of the day, Jarina deadheaded to Udorn on C-123K 4576. (Thirty-seven minutes.)

**PHANOM PENH**

One day during this off-period, Wayne Knight called me into his office and instructed me to plan a direct Twinpac flight to Phnom Penh, Cambodia, for a possible evacuation of U.S embassy employees and other Americans from a soccer field in the city center. The capital was mostly surrounded by bad guys, and except for the northwest quadrant, the communist net, including reported missile sites, was tightening around the city.

The trip would be long. Planning required gathering several 1-250,000 sectional maps to plot the course. As our 1972 trip

into Cambodia from Pakse had proved, under normal conditions, fitted with a 150-gallon auxiliary tank, S-58T endurance would be slightly in excess of four hours, so, if properly planned, fuel would not constitute a problem.

For the next several hours I commandeered Jim Wilson's FIC briefing room. Then, working on my knees with maps spread all over the floor, I employed a protractor and ruler plotting and recording headings, distances, and estimated times, checkpoints, and LORAN coordinates to the target. <sup>19</sup> At one time, Wayne entered the room to see how the work was progressing. Seemingly satisfied, he left. After I completed the assigned task, the maps and notes were neatly folded by FIC representative Jim

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<sup>19</sup> I was not provided any coordinates or hard evidence of enemy locations, so I was unable to factor deviations from a direct track to avoid enemy concentrations. Also, present wind and weather conditions would have to await an actual mission to plug into the equation.

Wilson and filed in a secure place for future reference. <sup>20</sup>

We journeyed to Bangkok on STO for a break from Udorn, to check airline flight schedules, and to prepare for our upcoming home leave.

***"Home leave is still planned for June. I believe that we will be home sometime between the 20th and 25th. It should***

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<sup>20</sup> That was the last we heard regarding any Twinpac mission to Cambodia. In a 01/02/01 Email Wayne Knight stated that he had no idea where the request might have originated, but was reasonably certain it had to have been passed from AB-1. I had a theory that it might have been requested to shame the Air Force. Whatever the intent, the Air Force did eventually formulate an evacuation plan using their larger helicopters.

Earl H. Tilford, Jr., *The United States Air Force Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1992), 136-138.

*"Following the American withdrawal from South Vietnam, the winding down of the war in Laos, and the cessation of the bombing in Cambodia, Air Force planners began working on contingency plans for the evacuation of Americans and selected foreigners from these countries. On June 27, 1973, the United States Support Activities Group/Seventh Air Force published Contingency Plan 5060C, 'Eagle Pull,' concerning the evacuation of Phnom Penh. Even while the bombing of Cambodia continued, in the spring of 1973 Phnom Penh seemed in danger of falling to the Khmer Rouge. They surrounded the city in April and pushed the troops of the Forces Armees National Khmer back into the suburbs. Unlike Vietnam, the American bombing ended in Cambodia with no reciprocal 'ceasefire' from the enemy.*

*Rescue units received the first edition on CONPLAN 5060 in late June."*

The Air Force plan consisted of three options. The third option was to be implemented if enemy forces closed the main air airport of Pochentong. In this case, a specified number of CH/HH-53 helicopters would be employed to evacuate American embassy personnel and their dependents, U.S. Government workers, and all other American citizens as well as certain Cambodian nationals. Evacuations would be performed as required at designated LZs at Phnom Penh, Battambang, Kompong Som, and other major towns.

*"When the bombing stopped on August 15, 1973 [courtesy of the U.S. Congress], the fate of the Khmer Republic rested with its army [FANK]...Unexpectedly, Cambodian government forces held outside Phnom Penh and defended their major cities. The Khmer Rouge withdrew to the countryside in the autumn of 1973..."*

*extend through July and the first of August. I believe that our flight will get to New York at 1900. There is an earlier flight but we will catch what we can. We will take a taxi from the airport as it is easier..*

*Amanda is standing in the playpen now. She yaks away about various things, but we cannot understand her yet..*

*We will go to Steamboat for about a week.."*

Letter Home, 05/24/73.

As usual, because of work requirements, letters from home crossed with mine. Therefore, my Father elected to wait until we arrived at Dorsey Place to discuss financial and other pertinent matters with me. He brought up the buzz word, Watergate, a politically sensitive subject with which I was not acquainted, but one that would eventually impact my future with Air America and Special Project work.

*"...the unsettled conditions due to 'Watergate' and the possible reactions if Nixon is the fall guy..*

*This country is in one Hell of a shape with all the exposures of underhanded politics and graft, malfeasance in office and just plain shenanigans.."*

Letter from Home, 05/21/73.

## **THE WATERGATE CONUNDRUM**

Political paranoia ruled in 1972 Washington. Concerned about activist groups and some political types, the Richard Nixon Administration ordered investigations by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Internal Revenue Service.

All the investigations and search for information came to a head on 17 June 1972 when five surrogates of the Nixon

Administration were apprehended at the Watergate office of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) headquarters in Washington, D.C. When arrested, the men were engaged in photographing campaign documents and installing wiretaps in high level principal's phones.

The FBI investigated. Others were implicated, indicted in September, convicted, and sentenced to prison in January 1973.

Throughout early investigations and court trials, Nixon insisted that neither he nor his White House staff members were aware of any malfeasance leading to the break-in. Despite Watergate revelations, Richard Nixon was reelected in one of largest landslides in U.S. political history.

As time went by, it became apparent to investigators that a conspiracy and massive cover up was involved. During early February the Senate voted to form a committee to investigate Watergate.

The investigators and media would not leave the incident alone, and by Late March and April 1973 evidence began to reveal that Nixon did have knowledge of the Watergate DNC intrusion. Lies begat lies and, instead of admitting to knowing about the planned break-in, the cover up worsened. <sup>21</sup>

## **JARINA**

Monday morning Mike Jarina deadheaded to The Alternate on Papa Foxtrot Gulf to crew 13F with Mike Barksdale and Flight Mechanic Terry. (One plus twenty-five.). They worked Ban Na (LS-15) north of Sam Thong, MOUNG OUM (LS-22) in the valley just east of Phou Bia, and further to the east at Padong (LS-05). All

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<sup>21</sup> Internet: Wikipedia, *Watergate Scandal*. Revelations continued to surface, and will be narrated either in this work or in the final 1974 book.

work was calculated to bolster defenses and the morale of the troops and villagers. RON Long Tieng. (Eight plus twenty-five.)

During the day, Herb Baker and crew experienced engine problems with Bell 205Am XW-PFH in the vicinity of a refugee camp at Ban Nam Song (LS-363) south of Long Tieng. They crashed at the Tango signal one mile southeast of Site-363 and seven miles west of Site-37. Minor injuries were incurred. <sup>22</sup>

Jarina and crew continued work out of Long Tieng on the 22nd. Their first efforts took them to Padong, then to the site of Baker's crash. The investigation team he had onboard would assess damage to Papa Foxtrot Hotel, determine what would be necessary to place the machine back in flying condition, or, if not possible, remove critical parts like radios for return to Udorn. Later, he went to Nam Houi (LS-360), far to the east in the Tha Thom valley area. The crew RON again at The Alternate. (Nine plus fifty-five.)

The men spent Wednesday working at MOUNG CHA (LS-113), sometimes called VP's farm during past years because of the valley's grassy, broad rolling hills. <sup>23</sup> RON Site-20A. (Nine plus forty-five.) Mike deadheaded home the next day on C-130 218-08. (Forty-eight minutes.) <sup>24</sup>

After a dry spell from flying, on the 28<sup>th</sup>, I deadheaded to Pakse on 28G. (One plus thirty-six.) After lunch at the Air America hostel, I assumed command of Papa Hotel Alpha with Al Cates and Chuck Low for another attempt to set or reinstall the Vinh number two ADR north of Thakhet. Following some practice,

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<sup>22</sup> Joe Leeker. Accident report Papa Foxtrot Hotel, 05/21/73.

<sup>23</sup> After Tony Poe married Sang, and while he and Vang Pao were still somewhat friendly, the general presented Tony and his wife with a piece of property around MOUNG CHA to raise cattle for commercial use. Originally a Meo refugee center, the area developed into one of many large refugee villages to contain individuals of various ethnic origins.

<sup>24</sup> Mike Jarina Interviews and logbook entries.





Tha Thom (LS-11) valley. Route-4, a secondary road from Xieng Khouang Ville through Tha Vieng, passed the former Neutralist garrison at Tha Thom and turned south through Borikhane before intersecting Route-13 and reaching Paksane (L-35).

Author Collection.

the mission was unsuccessful and we recovered to Udorn at 0035 on the 29<sup>th</sup>. (Four plus fifteen, three fifty-five night, ten landings.)

Mike Jarina, Biff Steadman (DOH 06/07/71), and Bob Noble returned to Long Tieng in 13F on the 30th. They worked a full day and RON. (Eight plus twenty.) The following day Mike deadheaded south on 405 to Wattay Airport (thirty-one minutes) and then to Udorn on Twin Otter 74M. (Twenty-nine minutes.) <sup>25</sup>

The last day of the month, Tom Grady, Chuck Low, and I checked in to operations early to prep and fly Papa Hotel Bravo. After much hot work on the parking ramp, we were unable to resolve torque splits and our projected flight was aborted. (One plus  
twelve.)

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<sup>25</sup> Biff Steadman was a well-liked individual in our group, who later worked for a commercial operator in the Gulf of Mexico. Although he worked for a different company, I often ate lunch with him on gas-oil rigs. Sadly, I later heard that Biff passed quickly from a massive aortic aneurism.

**T**here was still considerable interest in resurrecting cogent intelligence information from the Vinh tap and the two relays that transmitted North Vietnamese military information to the Nakhon Phanom high technology computer banks for translation and forwarding to Washington.

To verify or discount signal streams, AB-1 had Twotter pilots periodically conduct flights out of PS-44, but weather was not always cooperative. On the 31<sup>st</sup>, Jim Pearson and Paul Broussard flew one of these in 74M. (Five plus forty-eight, three plus twenty-five-night, thirty minutes instrument.) On three June, Pearson and Pete Parker again were assessing the Vinh ADRs during both day and night flights from PS-44. (Six plus thirty-three, Three plus forty-eight-night, one-hour instrument, seven landings.) <sup>1</sup>

Monday the fourth, I checked in to the Air America facility for a deadhead ride on 74M to command Papa Hotel Echo, one of two Twinpacs staged at PS-44. (One plus thirty.) The next day, Zube, Low, Kennedy, and I conducted warmup LORAN, ADR training in preparation for the number two ADR mission in Military Region Three. (Six plus twenty, two plus forty-five night, ten landings.)

Swapping aircraft to Papa Hotel Delta on the 6th, Zube, Low, and I, while waiting for optimum conditions, continued

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Pearson FEPA logbook entries for 05/31/73 and 06/03/73. It is not in Jim's log, but in addition to the Vinh evaluation, I can speculate with some certainty that using NVGs and other electronic equipment, he and those onboard were counting vehicles at night on the Ho Chi Minh Trail system.

honing our skills. (Four plus forty, thirty minutes night, ten landings.)

Training continued. After dinner on Thursday, both crews of Papa Hotel Echo and Papa Hotel Delta launched north at dark. Before long, contrasted against the dark curtain, a towering horizontal line of threatening thunderstorms and copious lightning flashes directly in our flight path convinced us to return to PS-44. We waited a few hours and then attempted another try. It was fruitless, so we RTB Udorn after midnight. (Six plus fifty, four plus thirty-five night, four landings.) The other crew was advised to RON at PS-44. <sup>2</sup>

Before he released us to go home, Rogers, in the quest for scarce intelligence from North Vietnam, informed us that, after launching from Udorn, another ADR attempt would be made again that night.

Although it was tough on personal biorhythms and family life, we were becoming acclimated to sleeping during the day and conducting night missions. I checked in at 1520. Lloyd Higgins, Deak Kennedy, and I were scheduled to crew XW-PHE to Savannakhet in order to be closer to the ADR site near Route-8.

Since we were well acquainted with mission requirements, only a cursory briefing took place at the White House. At the Q warehouse an additional ADR was strapped alongside the right fuselage in case it was needed.

We launched late in the day in order to fly the 123 nautical miles and arrive at L-39 under the cover of darkness. We would remain at the airport until the second aircraft reported approaching the vicinity. Then we would join up and attempt to accomplish the mission.

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<sup>2</sup> Monsoon June weather, particularly at night was especially non-cooperative, and we had no success replacing the number two Vinh relay antenna.

## **THE MYSTERIOUS GREEN FLASH**

Before arriving at the Savannakhet airfield, at twilight, a bizarre optical phenomenon occurred, one I had never witnessed before. While still a few miles west of the Mekong River, as far as I could see vertically and horizontally, the entire eastern quadrant of the sky, looking across the narrow waist of Laos in the direction of North Vietnam and toward the Tonkin Gulf, appeared in a light green color. It was an amazing sight, like a Twilight Zone episode suddenly being transported into a fish bowl. Not sure that the crew had witnessed the same spectacle, I called their attention to it. However, either they did not see it, or were not unduly impressed. Except for rare atmospheric conditions, like the Northern Lights (caused by supercharged ions), or an enhanced reflection from wet terrain and jungle, I had no plausible explanation for the occurrence. The steady green glow persisted for only a short time until it merged into, and was obscured, by darkness. <sup>3</sup>

Although we made one attempt to deliver the ADR to the relay position, weather conditions were not conducive to success. Therefore, we waited most of the night at Savannakhet before being recalled to Udorn. The mission aborted once again,

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<sup>3</sup> Green Flash: EW Knight Email. I told Wayne about the phenomenon, something about a "green flash" (his words for I do not recall saying this) across the horizon at or near sunset. We discussed this occurrence on more than one occasion. Wayne always thought I was having fun with him.

Author Note: Early one morning in the early eighties, after departing Moisant Airport in Kenner, Louisiana, cruising eastbound along Lake Pontchartrain in a Bell Jet Ranger, I looked to my left and observed a green haze over the lake, its banks and into the sky. Unexplainable, although far-fetched, I thought there might be something in the air produced from the numerous chemical plants that dot the banks of the Mississippi River.

According to Wikipedia and other articles on the Internet, green flashes have been observed by individuals at sunset or sunrise. This was mostly looking toward the sun, not exactly the same conditions I had encountered during my sighting. Another unexplained occurrence in Southeast Asia?

we recovered at 0035 on the ninth. (Four plus one five, three plus forty, one landing.)

## **JARINA IN MR-2**

With hostile military action largely quiescent in our primary area of operations, refugee work continued in Military Region Two. Late on the morning of the eighth, Mike Jarina deadheaded to The Alternate on Otter 74M (fifty minutes), which would begin a five-night RON in the mountains. Relieving the PIC of Papa Foxtrot Juliet, he joined Biff Steadman and Bob Nobel to work at LS-113 and LS-363. Mike and his crew RON at LS-98. (Four plus fifty-five.) <sup>4</sup>

The crew of Juliet worked west at the FAR firebase and adjacent defensive positions surrounding Sala Phou Khoun (Site-260) on Saturday. Terminating at 20 Alternate well after dark, they logged eight plus forty, and forty-five-night hours.

Terry Olsen replaced Steadman, and work continued at Sala Phou Khoun on the tenth. Until being repaired, radio problems caused a one and a half hour down time, but eight plus ten hours were logged. <sup>5</sup> Bobby Barrow then replaced Noble on the eleventh, and the crew was engaged in working the entire day around the Moug Cha area. (Eight plus five, thirty minutes night.)

As part of the realignment of irregular forces, the crew of Papa Foxtrot Juliet spent the next day replacing and shuttling troops from Ban Na to Long Tieng, for fixed wing shuttles to the Phou Khao Khouai training center on Ritaville Ridge (LS-53) to commence five weeks retraining.

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<sup>4</sup> Jarina logged LS-98, a valid, but largely disused site number for LS-20A.

<sup>5</sup> Radio problems were greatly reduced when solid state electronics were integrated into modern aircraft. They replaced the old vacuum tube radios subject to aircraft vibrations, moisture, and heat-related issues that would often overheat fail and/or cause smoke in the cockpit.



Looking northwest at the Sala Phou Khoun (LS-260) fire support base and airstrip on Route-13.

Author Collection.

During Mike's last day in the field, the effort was focused again on the Route-13/7 junction. After flying seven plus forty hours, he relinquished his ship to a new arrival and deadheaded to T-08 on 6468. (Forty-nine-minutes.)

After the aborted night flight on 8/9 June, I had a couple of days off the schedule. Anticipating a return to Military Region Three, and using the free time to advantage, in anticipation of home leave, I entered Charlie Lane's personnel office and requested a letter on Air America letterhead identifying me as a Company employee. Charlie, always a helpful individual, issued the following letter while I was on standby for the ADR mission:

*"To Whom It May Concern:*

*The bearer of this letter, Captain Harry R. Casterlin, is employed with Air America, Inc. in Udorn, Thailand. He is presently traveling on vacation. This letter is effective 18 June 1973.*

*Any courtesies you may extend to him will be greatly appreciated.*

*Charles L. Lane  
Manager Personnel Administration  
& Industrial Relations"*

## **CARON**

Drug use in Southeast Asia became a political hot button issue in Washington under the Nixon Administration. There was a number of unfounded finger pointing in books, newspapers, magazine articles, and speculative exposés that purportedly implicated General Vang Pao, CIA, and Air America employees in the illegal narcotics trade. None of these accusations was ever satisfactorily proven, but to assuage some individuals, a



Security Inspection Services Department (SIS) was created, and a procedure was instituted at Udorn to randomly check flight crew baggage for narcotics or illegal substances. Thai and Americans, including a German shepherd sniffer dog, performed the work. The inspection was mandatory and, although generally unpopular, most crews complied, but there were some like our resident bad-boy, Bob Caron, who firmly objected to being checked. <sup>6</sup>

*"SIS seems to have a continual problem with a few individuals on the flight line. One of the chronic problems has consisted of dealings with the Subject [Bob Caron]. He never has accepted the idea and concept of SIS and has continually fought the system.*

*The latest incident occurred on 12 June 1973 when he arrived [from L-08] at 1700 hours on H-85. A Thai inspector asked to inspect his personal baggage and the Subject refused to be allowed to be inspected and proceeded to the Operations desk. SIS Supervisor, John Cupp was summoned to the Operations desk to ascertain the pilot's name for reporting purposes. When asked by Cupp if there was any reason that the personal baggage could not be inspected Caron replied, 'Yes, it's full of narcotics. I find it insulting to have my bag checked.'*

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<sup>6</sup> Narcotics, as they had from time immemorial, were indeed grown, processed, and distributed in many parts of Laos. Legal in Laos, the opium poppy provided the only good cash crop poor mountain people could rely on for subsistence. I personally witnessed some of the growing, harvesting, and transportation of narcotics. Other helicopter pilots observed transportation of drugs by Lao military helicopters and planes (originally provided by U.S. MAP) in Military Region One. Not condoned by U.S. agencies in Laos, the drug trade was generally overlooked in consideration of the greater goal of keeping the Pathet Lao and Vietnamese at bay and out of Thailand. Top Lao generals like Ouane accumulated enormous amounts of money from the drug industry to fund and maintain their status, and it probably would have been an entirely different war had an early crackdown on drugs been instituted.

Again, the purpose of SIS was explained to him and he replied, 'If you want to check my bag it is out there,' and walked off.

The SIS contract does not contain any provisions for having to increasingly accept insults and leaving the option of inspection to the pilot's [discretion]..."<sup>7</sup>

Caron continued to be a problem. His refusal to have his baggage inspected the next morning by Kraikeo, a Thai SIS man, fostered a report to his superior:

"At 0630 hours on 13 June 73, I was checking the UH-34D aircraft [number] 53 going to L-39. There were two crew [members] and two [deadhead personnel]. All were checked except the pilot. He refused to be checked and he again said that you do damn thing.

'Did you tell boss?'

'Yes, I have to tell my boss and he spoke to me.'

'Anything happen? Who checks your bag?'

After I reported to SIS supervisor about this matter and yesterday afternoon about this pilot [that] he have refused to be checked on 12 June 73."<sup>8</sup>

## **HIGH TAIL**

Ceasefire violations continued in South Vietnam. This prompted representatives of the original signers of the 27

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<sup>7</sup> Inter-office routing slip from the Chief of Security, Tyler Harding to the Chief Pilot Rotary Wing (Burke) and the Vice President Northern Thailand Division (Abadie), 06/14/73. Author Note: Narcotics were the key item of the SIS searches; our personal weapons were not factored into the equation.

<sup>8</sup> Kraikeo, P. SIS, Statement, 06/13/73. Although most of the statement is recorded in the original, the Author has attempted to retain the flavor of the report. Wayne Knight Email, 01/02/01. Wayne doesn't believe there were many such problems. Cupp was the dog-handler; Harding eventually replaced Leonard.

January agreement, to sign on 13 June, a new fourteen-point paper calling for the end to all violations in South Vietnam.

The settlement included: an end to all military activities at noon on 15 June, an end to U.S. reconnaissance over North Vietnam, and the resumption of U.S. minesweeping operations in Vietnamese waters, the resumption of U.S. talks on aid to North Vietnam, and the meeting of opposing commanding officers in South Vietnam to prevent outbreaks of hostilities. <sup>9</sup>

The June 15 settlement did not involve Cambodia, but, anticipating imminent cessation of all American military action throughout Southeast Asia by U.S. Congressional legislation in Washington, the Agency created a clandestine program that would continue to cooperate with the Cambodian government in preventing complete communist seizure of the country.

Code named **High Tail**, the intelligence gathering and targeting operation was conceived and tailored to report Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese concentrations, and to support American bombing missions in the country. <sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> John Bowman Almanac.

<sup>10</sup> High Tail: Despite the Paris Agreement signing by diplomats, the Second Indochina War was far from over in Southeast Asia. In fact, a nasty civil war developed and accelerated in Cambodia directly after the bilateral Paris ceasefire agreement. Since USAF F-111s were still bombing targets in Cambodia, the activity led to requirements for targeting. Air America was tapped for the intelligence gathering job. Otter Captain Jim Pearson fueled at Pakse prior to launch (1000 gallons would provide over ten hours endurance), and then flew toward Phnom Penh with four Cambodian-speaking interpreters. Approaching the capital, he would climb to very high altitudes (20,000 feet) and maneuver to different areas at the direction of the onboard interpreters to intercept enemy radio transmissions. The work entailed orbits around Phnom Penh, Battambang, Siem Reap, and Prey Veng. Much like the previous interdiction of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, collected information would then be relayed to a central command for collation, targeting, and air action.

In order to implement the projected multi-hour mission, Twin Otter 89X was equipped with 650-gallon long range fuel tanks.

Following a White House briefing on the twelfth, Jim Pearson and "Diamond" Jim Voyles, assigned the initial day-night mission over Cambodia, departed for Pakse in 89X. After fueling, they flew south in daylight, penetrated the border at altitude, orbited at various locations, and collected information for the USAF. Following refueling at Lima-11, they recovered at Udorn. (Ten plus thirty, one plus nineteen night, two plus thirty-two instrument, three landings.)

The same day, my crew and I departed Udorn at dark for Savannakhet. With weather not promising for our precision work, the ADR mission was aborted and we returned home at 2120 hours. (Two plus fifty night, two landings.) I was told to return home, standby, and await further word of another Military Region Three mission attempt.

With the first mission considered highly successful, High Tail continued. Jim Pearson and Jim Voyles returned to Pakse on the thirteenth. Conducting basically the same modus operandi, day missions were flown in Cambodia. They RTB Udorn. (Ten plus thirty-six, one plus thirty-nine-night, four actual instruments, three landings.)

The next day, Captain Pearson and Jim Russell were back in Military Region Four for another Cambodian penetration. Following a very long day, they secured at the Air America facility. (Eleven plus thirty-eight, two plus nine night, four landings.) <sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Jim Pearson FEPA logbook entries, 06/13, 14/73 and Email. Hank Edwards Email. Hank had a discussion with Buddy Rogers about the Otter crew using the Infrared FLIR device in the plane to record vehicle lights on the Trails.

Hank Edwards, Gary Gentz, and I checked into operations at 1420. Our mission was tailored to provide SAR coverage for Pearson's increasingly hazardous work with 89X. We repositioned Papa Hotel Delta to Pakse. Following dinner at the Air America hostel, at the appropriate time, we launched to provide necessary support for N389EX. It was a payment in kind for all the excellent support Pearson had provided us during Special Project work over the previous months.

The night never seemed to end, and we did not recover at Udorn until 0210 on the 15<sup>th</sup>. (Six plus fifteen, four plus forty-five night, four landings.) At termination we were instructed to standby at home and await the next requirement.

On Monday the 16<sup>th</sup>, Jim Pearson and Olson positioned N389EX from Vientiane to Pakse. After completing their assigned mission, the crew RON at Lima-11. (Eight plus fifty-six, one plus fifty-six-night, four hours instrument.)

The same day, a B-bus driver delivered Captain Lloyd Higgins, Flight Mechanic Deak Kennedy, and me to the Transportation Department portion of the portico leading to the Operations desk at 1515 hours. We gathered and transferred our gear to Papa Hotel Delta, while Deak inspected and prepared the machine for the flight to Pakse to support the Twin Otter crew. We then continued to Rogers' office for a briefing on the latest mission. We found that we would again be assigned to cover Pearson during the Cambodian mission, and an additional briefing would be conducted by the Agency Customer at Pakse.

After waiting in the air operations radio room, at the appropriate time, we launched south toward the Lao-Cambodian border. There we assumed an orbit and listened for a code word indicating problems, and the necessity to penetrate Cambodia. There were no incidents, so after Pearson's work was complete, we were recalled to Pakse. By then it was the 17<sup>th</sup>. With the

mission accomplish, we were released, and recovered at Udorn at 0315 hours. (Five plus thirty-five, four plus five night, six landings.) Because of the extensive duty time incurred, I was assigned standby at home.

From his Washington office, Henry Kissinger performed his part in defending U.S. bombing in Cambodia. At one time, in an interview with a reporter, he stated:

*"People usually refer to the bombing of Cambodia as if it had been unprovoked, secretive action. The fact is that we were bombing North Vietnam troops that had invaded Cambodia, that were killing many Americans from these sanctuaries, and we were doing it with acquiescence of the Cambodian government, which never once protested against it, and which encouraged us to do it. I may have a lack of imagination, but I fail to see the moral issue involved and why Cambodian neutrality should apply to only one country. Why is it moral for the North Vietnamese to have 50,000 to 100,000 troops in Cambodia, why should we let them kill Americans from that territory, and why, when the government concerned never once protested, and indeed told us that if we bombed unpopulated areas that they would not notice,*

*why in all these conditions is there a moral issue?"*<sup>12</sup>

That night Jim Pearson and Olson resumed their High Tail cross border work in Cambodia and RON at Pakse. (Nine plus fifty, five plus fifteen night, four landings.)

The Otter crew's work continued on the 18<sup>th</sup>. (Five plus forty-four, one plus twenty-one night.) Pearson and an assorted crew continued night work until almost the end of the month.<sup>13</sup>

I was off the flight schedule until the 21<sup>st</sup>, when my vacation began. Home leave was to last until August. I was out of the inner sanctum, but assume that the Special Project

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<sup>12</sup> Notes regarding U.S. congressional activity.

John Bowman, *Almanac*, 340. Because the Senate had approved a bill to block any U.S. military activity in Indochina, which the House of Representatives concurred on 4 June, there was some urgency to get as much accomplished in Cambodia as possible. In order to continue bombing in the country, President Nixon and Henry Kissinger lobbied hard to postpone the ban until 15 August.

Richard Nixon, RN: *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Touchstone, 1978), 887-888. "On June 25,...the House of Representatives agreed to a Senate bill immediately cutting off funds for U.S. bombing actions in Cambodia. The effect of this bill was to deny me the means to enforce the Vietnam peace agreement." Nixon immediately vetoed the bill. Realizing that additional cutoff bills would be forthcoming, the adversaries agreed to a compromise establishing 15 August as the date for the cessation of bombing in Cambodia. Congressional approval would be required for funding U.S. military action in any part of Indochina. "Kicking the can down the road," the President's action provided the final nail in the coffin for Indochina, as communist leaders were well aware that Nixon no longer had the congressional approval required to use military clout to back up attempts to keep the communists from violating the Paris peace agreements. Adhering to their own timetable, this led to the total loss of both South Vietnam and Laos in 1975. Internet, Wikipedia, *Operation Menu*.

<sup>13</sup> Jim Pearson FEPA logbook entries for June 1973. Other crews were probably assigned to provide cover for the Otter crew operations.

continued to operate. <sup>14</sup>

### **JARINA GOES UPCOUNTRY**

On the fifteenth, Mike Jarina deadheaded on Caribou 2392 to Wattay Airport to join Bob Braithwaite and Flight Mechanic McClellan, who had RON in Vientiane. They departed for The Alternate in 35F, and logged seven plus forty-five hours before securing to RON there.

The next day mechanical problems grounded and limited them to one plus fifteen hours. After the aircraft was repaired and deemed airworthy late the next morning, the crew was assigned to work far to the east at LS-360. From there they supported refugees at Can Sa Ni (LS-45), in a river valley thirteen miles east of Mounq Moc. They recovered at Long Tieng at dark. (Six plus fifteen, twenty-five minutes night.)

First Officer Howell replaced Braithwaite on Monday morning. Work commenced at Ban Na and continued until after dark (seven plus fifty, fifty-minutes night) when Mike was recalled and deadheaded to Udorn on Twin Otter 74M. (Thirty-three minutes.)

Jarina's final flight of the month was logged on the 29th. He deadheaded to Site-20A on 636 (one hour) where he joined Mike Barksdale and Gary Gentz in 12F and RTB Udorn. <sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Wayne Knight Email, 01/02/01. Wayne does not have any written reference to helicopter Special Project operations while I was on home leave, but had no need to know as he was also away from the job. During June-July his parents flew to the Far East and he met them in Sydney, Australia. They planned to visit Bali, Indonesia, but there was trouble in Sukarno's government and the run on the U.S. dollar stopped them short in Singapore. Instead, they flew to Penang Island for a few days, then to Phuket and Bangkok.

<sup>15</sup> Mike Jarina Interviews.



## **THE TRIP TO CONUS**

Following a few days off the flight schedule, our legal vacation began on 22 June.

Before leaving for Bangkok and then the States, I paid my respects to management types in the Administration Building, and left the Cortina parked at the airfield for maximum security. It was not that I did not trust people living around our house and relatives to care for personal things, but with unrest building in Thailand, the mood in Udorn was rapidly changing, and I wanted to be certain that I had a vehicle upon return to Southeast Asia.

The five of us boarded the overnight train to Bangkok, and remained at the Montien Hotel long enough to obtain necessary immunizations, paperwork, and airline tickets.

As usual, the trip across the Pacific was long, boring, and fatiguing--especially caring for three young children--and since my wife was still not a good traveler, I was the designated caretaker.

When we arrived at the Seattle port of entry and retrieved our luggage, I was anxious to clear customs quickly and confirm connections for our final flight to the East Coast. The customs process was never especially smooth or easy at either the Honolulu or Seattle gateways to the States, but this time we encountered no problems. The cab ride from Kennedy International home was equally smooth, unlike the nightmare which occurred in 1971.

Jet lag traveling east across the Pacific always seemed worse than the return route. It usually took the better part of a week to recover and adjust to East Coast time. It generally took Tuie somewhat longer to begin feeling herself again. Having considerably more vitality, the kids sprung back quickly, and became somewhat of a headache for my elderly parents. The two-

and-a-half-bedroom house with only one bathroom was a distinct challenge, and there was no place to hide. Tuie and I slept in Dad's room, with Amanda's crib at the foot of the bed. Mom had her small room that used to be Dad's study and my nursery. The boys and my Father bunked in my old room. It was quite cramped, but family love saw us through. Fortunately, the weather was favorable, and there was a large back and side yard where the children could play and expend their energy. Dad and Amanda bonded instantly. While she wriggled in his lap, he called her baby. In turn she called him Pop Pop.

Toward the end of the month I was back in circulation, traveling downtown in the black 1966 Ford Mustang to the Halle & Stieglitz brokerage offices to confer with my Father's cousin's husband and Customer Man, Gordon Fuller. Gordon advised Dad, and in my absence, the two of them managed my stock portfolio. It was a great place to watch the ticker tape scroll across the sitting room wall, and to visit with former high school chums, Frank Blatz and Dave Walker, who maintained law and real estate businesses in the town.

**W**e enjoyed our time off and the attention neighbors and relatives offered us. The weather in July was a lot cooler than we were used to in Thailand, but we tolerated it. Short trips were made to visit friends.

When I detected that we were beginning to reek like dead fish, I elected to take the family to Steamboat Springs, Colorado, visit the Don Valentine family, and observe how the Sunray business was progressing. After arriving at Denver's Stapleton International Airport, we were booked further west on a Twin Otter to Steamboat-Hayden airport west of Steamboat. The plane was exactly like the ones we used in Laos, but without the electronic bells and whistles Captain Jimmy Pearson's ship possessed. Cruising over the Rocky Mountains above 10,000 feet I noted that Amanda was turning slightly blue from what looked like anoxia. I became anxious and went to the cockpit where the young pilots were sucking oxygen from tubes. When I informed them of the situation, they said there was no oxygen available for passengers. Moreover, they were on a flight plan and the rocks below prevented descending very much. Believing Amanda suffered from hyperventilation, the stewardess provided a motion sickness bag for her to breathe into. This added CO<sub>2</sub>, which restored her color. Moreover, by this time we were out of the mountains and able to descend into the Yampa Valley's less rarified air.

Don was waiting for us at the airport with his station wagon to take us to my two-bedroom condominium that I had purchased at Sunray's Ski Times Square. The children loved Steamboat. Replacing Tex McGill, who had become involved in his own "get rich" projects, Don had hired a young fellow named

David Baldinger. <sup>1</sup> For some reason, Ricky considered the Baldinger name both unique and funny. He kept repeating Baldinger-Baldinger to distraction in bursts, and with various vocal chants and chuckles. Fortunately, Dave was a good sport about this.

One afternoon I borrowed a car and we drove to the hot springs located in the northern mountains overlooking the almost 7,000-foot Yampa Valley. <sup>2</sup> With an altitude well in excess of the valley floor, the geothermal springs were formerly reputed to have boiled eggs. Now the water was merely warm like a hot tub. When we arrived, a few hippy youngsters were frolicking in the water. Seeing our tribe, they elected to leave. We did not have bathing suits, so, with no one around, we stripped down to our essentials, lounged on the rocks, and splashed in the water. After a while, a dark, menacing looking cloud surged low over the hills from the northwest. When it became apparent that we would soon encounter severe weather, I told Tuie to take Amanda and hurry up the bank to the car for shelter. As expected, it began raining, and then small hail began to pelt us. It was too late for us to leave, so I gathered the boys under my arms and body, hoping the hail would not be too large. The storm passed quickly. Having enough fun for the afternoon, we left for the more benign valley floor.

One evening Tex McGill and his wife invited us to their house to attend a party. From previous visits, I knew and felt comfortable with most of the people there. One of the men, a

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<sup>1</sup> For various reasons co-workers did not remain long with Don. Charley Williams started working with Don Valentine in 1966, and then elected to start his own real estate company. Tex McGill was in a hurry to become wealthy, so he formed a limited partnership to acquire the Harbor Hotel in town and later started a land development project to the south across the Yampa Valley.

<sup>2</sup> The town of Steamboat had its own municipal swimming pool fed by natural hot springs.

heavy individual, had previously written speeches for Democrat politicians in Washington, and was quite opinionated. As the booze flowed liberally, I heard him, and other people discussing a scandal involving President Nixon on a subject they called Watergate. They were even talking about the possible impeachment of the president--my president. Not particularly interested or attuned to politics, I really did not fully understand what they were talking about, but as a life-long Republican, and having attended the same university as Dick Nixon, and flown in the Naval aviation training command with his brother as my temporary IP Ed Nixon, I felt a distinct bond with the Nixon family, and took exception to the discussion. Having nothing constructive to add, and in the greater interest of the gathering, I maintained my silence and walked away.

Tuie told me later that while she was looking for a bathroom, she encountered the speech writer and Tex's wife embracing and kissing in a closet. Despite the fact that everyone had several small children, I was aware that the people in the group had a tendency to be a little wild. <sup>3</sup>

Finally, the fun was over and it was time to return to New Jersey, and begin preparing for the return trip to Thailand. During the next few days, we shopped at Sears for kid's clothing and taking advantage of sales in a Pathmark store in a mall above Route-22, stocked up on consumables like American toothpaste that was difficult or inordinately expensive in Thailand.

Then in their seventies, my parents were considered ancient humans by us young pups, so during the first days of August it

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<sup>3</sup> I had plans to build on property purchased at the foot of Mount Werner, live in Steamboat, and work with Don at Sunray Land Corporation. However, Tuie recalled this incident and judged the area's lifestyle too different for us more conservative types. I deferred to her instincts.

was with some trepidation that my family and I took leave of the old folks and my ancestral home. I was a little relieved to be returning to a normal life in my own home, and I am sure Mom and Dad felt the same.

Attempting to craft a relatively pleasant trip, I hired a limousine and driver from a local company to offer a cool, comfortable environment and deliver us safely to Kennedy International Airport. We had not gone very far when Rick indicated he wanted to return to his grandparents' house. David Baldinger's name was heard several times, and also became an integral part of our conversation.

The Casterlin curse of the road continued, and a trouble-free trip was not in the cards. We had nearly reached the airport (I could see the terminal from the main road), when Tuie, who was not always a good traveler on any mode of transportation, complained about feeling unwell. Then, to cap this off, perhaps in sympathy with her Mom, Amanda abruptly vomited on the floor of the vehicle. The driver pulled over to the side of the road to let us out for some air. After Tuie and Amanda felt somewhat better, we anticipated continuing, but the vehicle would not start. It was frustrating, particularly since our scheduled departure time was fast approaching. Still unable to coax the limo into performing its assigned duty, we arrived at only one other option: hire another cab. I paid the driver, and hailed a smaller vehicle for the short trip to the terminal. Despite my apprehension, we were not late for the flight. With the advent of the Boeing 747 aircraft, and with terminals still inadequate to handle the increased hordes of people, and passenger shuffling had still not been totally resolved. Consequently, I had to wait an hour in line before reaching the ticket-baggage check-in counter.

Despite a rough beginning, the remaining trip was uneventful and we repaired to the familiar Montien Hotel in Bangkok for respite before returning to Udorn.

On 4 August I cashed two checks--one a 150-dollar check, another for a hundred dollars--at MS Michael, the authorized Air America money changer on Patpong Road. The funds would provide sufficient baht for Bangkok expenses, train fare, and immediate needs in Udorn.

While we were still recovering from jet lag, Ricky and I took a walk to the end of Patpong Road. Then we turned right at the Bangkok Christian Hospital onto Rama 4 road looking for Jim Moore's house. I wanted to talk to Jim, who had worked on the Bangkok Stock Exchange, about selling my 30,000 shares of Asian American stock for tax purposes. Asian American was a holding company for interests in Concrete Masonry, New Era Oil, and a marketing company. (I had broached the subject with boyhood friend and attorney Frank Blatz while still in the States.) There had been no financial sheet produced since 1969, and assets were virtually nil.

Many changes had been effected since I had last been to Jim's house, and the old Coca Cola plant was no longer in existence, so I had no positive fix on Jim's area. We walked almost to New Road when I stopped and asked a shopkeeper for directions. Jim was not home and his wife Ann indicated Jim no longer worked on the stock exchange. I wrote Moore a letter later in the month.

## **LAOS**

*"The Laotian negotiations are once again at an impasse. Vientiane's chief negotiator Pheng Phongsavan said on 3 July that he and his communist counterpart Phoumi Vongvichit have agreed that no further progress is possible in their talks*

*unless concessions are made on the major political and military differences still separating the two sides. Pheng does not expect to meet with Phoumi again 'in the next few days' since Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma has no plans 'for the time being' to come forward with additional concessions to the communists.*

*Souvanna's self-imposed deadline of 1 July for final agreement has not lapsed, and he appears disposed to bide his time in the hope that the communists will soften their demands.* <sup>4</sup>

Following the February ceasefire agreement in Laos the U.S. Embassy staff and the Royal Lao Government agreed on a scheduled phase-out of the Thai Unity forces during fiscal 1974. By mid-year desertions from the Thai force in Laos had diminished the total from 17,000 in February to 10,000.

The Agency downsized its paramilitary influence throughout the country. All special guerrilla units would be deactivated over a twelve-month period, and there would be a sixty-percent reduction by December.

Rolling stock and twelve 105mm howitzers would be permanently transferred to the Lao Army, as well as the logistical requirements. All other equipment would revert to USG.

As to the Lao Air Force, when the Raven pilots departed, they delegated their previous forward air control responsibilities to a small number of RLAF pilots who had been chosen for the job since early 1972. <sup>5</sup>

### **BLAINE JENSEN DEPARTS SEA**

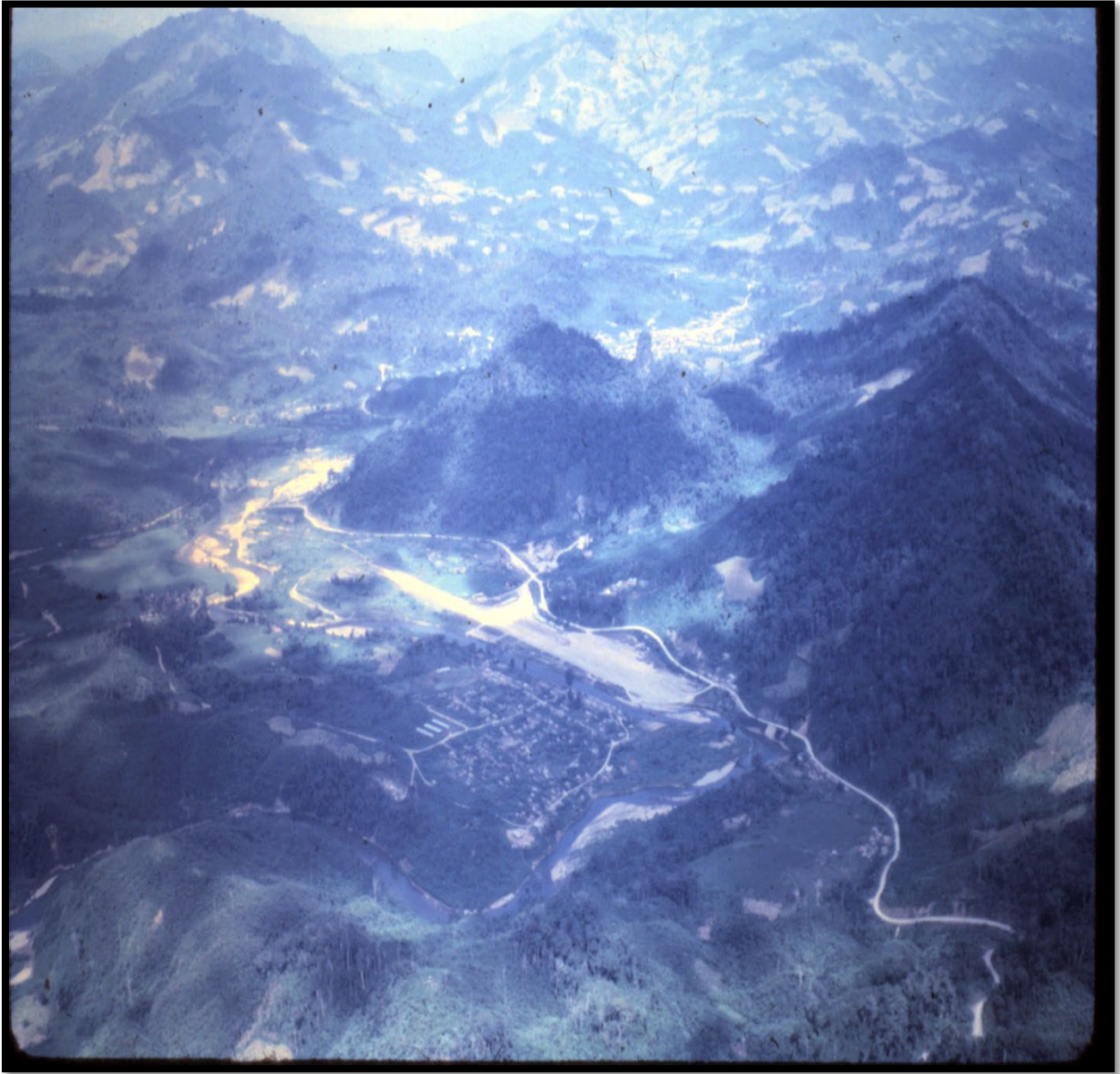
After ten years working in Laos for the International Voluntary Service (IVS) and USAID, Blaine Jensen departed the

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<sup>4</sup> CIA Bulletin, 07/06/73. Laos.

<sup>5</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 405.





Refugee site at Ban Son (LS-272), Laos. The dirt road extended north over rough terrain to Long Tieng.  
Author Collection.

country on the 4th of July, American Independence Day. As there were still refugees to feed and medicine to supply, he worked at Ban Son (Site-272) until departing for the States.

The temporary Lao peace accord signed in February changed everything. Other than supplying food and medicine until the refugees were considered self-sufficient, the USAID organization no longer had justification to help.

Directly after the historic signing, Jensen was required to travel to Long Tieng and inform General Vang Pao that American medical teams would no longer staff the hospitals. Instead, they would be operated with Filipino doctors and nurses under contract with Operation Brotherhood (OB). In the ten years Blaine had served in Laos that was the only time he witnessed and bore the brunt of Vang Pao's ire. <sup>6</sup>

The news worsened. Later Vang Pao was notified that aircraft rice drops would cease, and the people would have to walk to the road to retrieve rice shipped north by trucks from Vientiane. Used to other means of delivery, the Meo were terribly disappointed and exceedingly angry, plus individual morale sank to a low point.

Because of the dire situation, Blaine met with Americans remaining at The Alternate to seek an alternative. They all agreed that the hill tribes had been badly used by USG and something needed to be done for them. Consequently, they formulated a plan, which was then proposed to their superiors. Since USAID could no longer justify infusing funds into the hilltribe program, the CIA would provide money for a year to aid rehabilitation efforts. The men were successful in selling the plan. (To obfuscate the source, money had to be filtered through

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<sup>6</sup> The Author was present a few times when Vang Pao was angered. Contrasting with his normally smooth, olive skin, his face would flush beet red.

USAID.) Following a bitter battle with USAID Chief Charlie Mann, the American Ambassador, and the Chief of Station, Blaine managed to have the leaders agree to continue cargo rice deliveries and support the aircraft program. A longtime principal in the Theater who understood the language, people, and their needs, Jensen was then asked to head the development of a plan to use the rehabilitation money. He implemented this plan through General Vang Pao, the military, and civilian leaders in Military Region Two.

Jensen's other accomplishments were noteworthy. One was the fish hatchery program. He had started this project years before with a few ponds at Sam Tong and some at Long Tieng. Over the years, he had helped refugees build over 8,000 fish ponds. Fingerlings to stock the ponds were flown in from Vientiane or Thailand in plastic bags filled with oxygenated water. <sup>7</sup> The ponds were successful, providing critical protein on a regular basis for individuals who otherwise only received protein from an occasional chicken, duck, pig, or cow they slaughtered.

Afterward when the trouble began, he found time to go to the potential fish pond locations, look at the water supply, show the refugees how to build the ponds, and then supply the fingerlings. He also attempted to find time to return and enjoy the first meal with the refugees from the fruits of their labor, whether it was in the form of Chinese or Japanese carp, or Tilapia.

Consistent with the road system being developed in the area, a road had been built to MOUNG CHA (LS-113). Recently, a fish hatchery was being built in the MOUNG CHA area to supply fish fingerlings to support the enormous fish pond program.

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<sup>7</sup> There was a large fish hatchery located across the street from the Udorn reservoir.

After leaving, Blaine was not sure the program was ever completed.

Another priority was to introduce portable sawmills. There was abundant hard wood in Laos, and an excellent market for processed lumber existed in both Vientiane and Thailand.

## **IRON MOUNTAIN**

Minerals and natural resources were abundant, but generally unexploited in Laos. Except during the period of Japanese occupation and the First Indochina War, French geologists had conducted mineral surveys in Laos throughout their hundred-year Indochina tenure. With the exception of a working tin mine near Grove Jones north of Thakhet, the French never divulged the existence of mineral deposits to the world. Gold was removed from the Attopeu region in Military Region Four and Khang Khay on the northern Plain of Jars, and was spirited into Vietnam. In northwestern Military Region One, semi-precious gem stones such as sapphires were obtained from sandy islands in the Mekong River during low river stages, and on the banks of Ban Houei Sai.<sup>8</sup>

The revelation of iron ore in military Region Two surfaced in late 1963, when Edgar "Pop" Buell and his Lao assistant Thong Sar were conducting a trip to Phou Khao. While visiting the site, Pop observed local blacksmiths manufacturing knives, and inquired where they obtained the iron. He was informed that the ore was culled from a mountain in the area. Curious as to the possible commercial value of the mineral, Buell asked the smithy

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<sup>8</sup> A cornucopia of mineral resources in Laos was identified in later years. They included: barite, clays, coal, copper, dolomite, gold, graphite, gypsum, limestone, rock salt, sapphire, silver, tin, and zinc. There is also the potential for antimony, asbestos, bismuth, cobalt, iron ore, kaolin, lead, lignite, manganese, molybdenum, potash, silica sand, and tungsten.

to obtain an ore sample for him. He was informed a trip to the ore location would have to wait for the dry season, when the level of a river dropped low enough to cross. Even then, it was a full two-day walk from Site-14 to the mountain. As a result, it was well into the spring of 1964 before an iron ore sample arrived at Sam Tong.

Impressed with the sample, and encouraged to investigate further, Pop dispatched teams of villagers to assess the size of the deposit and return to Sam Tong with additional ore samples. AID workers secretly forwarded samples to the United States to be assayed. Everyone was amazed when the ore report was rated at 99 percent pure-among the highest ever analyzed in the U.S. From the description of the extent of the area provided by the villagers, and Porter pilot Lloyd Zimmerman's aerial surveys, using a magnetometer to judge the magnetic field strength, it was estimated there was an enormous supply of iron ore that would last for thirty to forty years, even with extensive mining.

Gaining access to the area was a challenge. There was an old established village of unknown ethnic origin situated close to the top of iron mountain. Not all mountain clans wanted to participate in the never-ending war. The people who were settled there wanted to be left alone. They were not friendly, never cooperated with Vang Pao, or built an airstrip. On several occasions when Blaine Jensen was flying in a Helio Courier with Air America Captains Lee Mullins or Al Rich dropping propaganda pamphlets, they received light battle damage directed at them by people on the mountain.

Meo mentor Edgar (Daddy Pop) Buell kept the exact location of the iron mountain secret from the outside world for an excellent reason. (We knew about the discovery, but not the location.)

Unlike the rest of Americans involved in the Meo project, who believed USG would first use the Meo and then walk away from them, Buell refused to imagine that his government would be so calloused. <sup>9</sup> More realistic than Buell, other AID representatives were aware that the U.S. would eventually withdraw from Laos, and so did the Meo counterparts they worked with.

In Pop's vision of the future, iron mountain was considered insurance for the Meo people to ensure their survival. Even if USG took advantage of the Meo and then dropped them, no one would ever be able to penetrate the mountainous area where he had re-located his people. The Meo, whom he called **his** people, would have a wealth of iron ore to mine and sell, which would provide them with the means to rebuild their clans and the Meo nation after the conflict.

When plans were being crafted to assist the Meo after hostilities ceased, an original priority had been development of Iron Mountain, but all the CIA would agree to was a feasibility study, because the expensive project involved construction of a railroad complex from Pha Khao south to the Nam Ngum Dam site. <sup>10</sup> This included constructing a large smelter on the Vientiane plain and utilizing inexpensive electric power from the Nam Ngum hydroelectric dam. The ore would be delivered via the rail line

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<sup>9</sup> As reported from a William Sullivan congressional inquiry, from the beginning of USG involvement in Laos, when participation was quite small, USG's (i.e. the State Department) documented intention had been to remain in a position to withdraw quickly if the situation so warranted. However, as the war progressed and expanded over the years, this policy became increasingly difficult to implement without incurring world disfavor.

<sup>10</sup> The mining plan displayed to Jensen in Washington anticipated the rail-line paralleling the road from the Nam Ngum Dam north to Houei Pamon, then northeast to Ban Son (LS-272). From there it would follow the road to Long Tieng, but stop at the Long Tieng/Pha Khao junction. Then a spur to Site-14 would be built across a bridge spanning the river to the actual site where the mining operation would be performed.

to the smelter, and the pig iron ingots would be sold in the world market. <sup>11</sup>

A final priority involved livestock and fowl husbandry. The animals were supposed to be introduced from Thailand.

At the time Jensen departed Laos, Americans were still working at the hospital, rice was being delivered by air, work was underway on the fish hatchery, a couple of portable sawmills had been delivered, with others ordered, but nothing had been accomplished regarding the livestock and fowl, nor anything conclusive decided regarding iron mountain. <sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Blaine Jensen Letters, #1, 02/13/96, #2, 03/02/96, #32, 08/04/98. Blaine had no idea how long Pop's iron mountain "secret" lasted. Word of the discovery eventually did leak. During July 1975, diplomats from the Lao Embassy visited Jensen's Washington office. The World Bank had completed a study on the iron mountain project, and the men were seeking funding from this entity and other international funding agencies like the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). However, no one seemed particularly interested in funding such a project, for rail line security could not be guaranteed. Consequently, they were seeking funding for the project from USG. However, by that time all USAID personnel had been expelled from Laos, and Blaine had to inform the representatives there was nothing he could do to help them unless they were prepared to reintroduce USAID into Laos. They were not able to do that...

Jensen has received numerous requests for validity of the ore's assayed value, including the number of samples assayed, and the location where each was obtained. To the date of his 1996 letter, the project was never undertaken. Blaine believes that if the project ever gets funded, profits would **never** benefit the Meo people in order to rebuild their lives and culture.

Over the span of ten years, Jensen had bonded with, and become very close to the Meo and other ethnic Lao, and what eventually happened to them affected him greatly.

During the fall of 1975, he visited with Vang Pao in Washington, D.C. With tears filling his eyes, Vang Pao placed his arms around Blaine and said, "*Tan Blaine, we lost everything.*" Jensen replied, "*Tan Naipan, I am sorry, and at this time I am embarrassed to be an American.*" Vang Pao then assured him, "*It is not your fault, you are my friend.*"

<sup>12</sup> Blaine Jensen #32 Letter, 08/04/98.

## **THE PROJECT**

Lack of information regarding the Special Project while on leave leads the Author to believe that there was a minimum of helicopter work performed. There could have been several reasons involved: a lack of funding, Washington politics and the ongoing Lao peace negotiations, adverse weather, or a lack of significant missions. However, these assumptions could be in error.

Twin Otter Captain Jim Pearson, accompanied by Ted Mauldin, Jim Russell, Olsen, Barney Heidt, Pete Parker, and Berl King, was still active at night. One assumes that he was counting trucks and dropping supplies to road watch teams in the forward Savannakhet and Pakse areas.

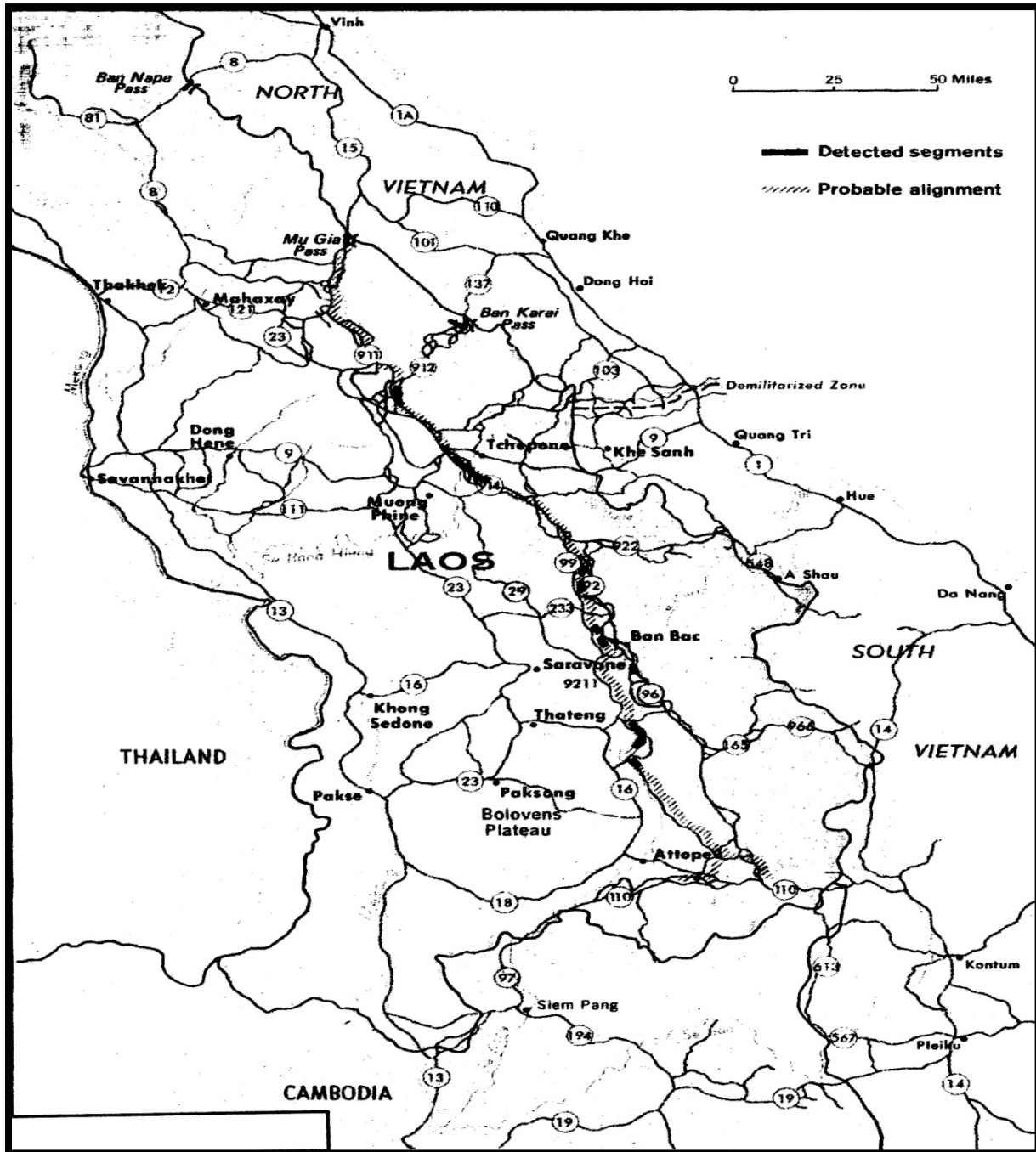
A new road was under construction in eastern Laos, and according to the latest intelligence:

*"The North Vietnamese appear to be building a major new road along the length of the Lao panhandle. Aerial photography during the past two months has revealed road crews and bulldozers working on 52 miles of new roadbed along widely scattered segments of the existing central supply corridor route.*

*The location of these segments and the similarity of design suggest that they eventually will be joined in one 300-mile highway from the Ban Karai and Mu Gia [Mugia] passes in the north to the southern Lao border. At the present pace, the work could be completed by next spring or even earlier.*

*The new road will be far superior to those previously constructed by the North Vietnamese in the Lao panhandle. North Vietnamese roads built in Laos have been single lane and have not had extensive protection from the effects of monsoon rains. The new segments, however, are wide enough for two lanes.*





The well-developed enemy logistical road system in eastern Laos.  
CIA Graphic, 10/07/73.

*Drainage ditches have been dug on either side of the road and culverts are being built in some areas.*

*The construction of the highway is clear evidence of the continuing importance of the Laotian infiltration corridor to Hanoi. The new road would increase the North Vietnamese capability to move supplies through Laos in all seasons and presumably would supplement a road of similar design and capacity that is being constructed southward from the [NV] border through communist controlled territory in South Vietnam."*<sup>13</sup>

Other tasks recorded in Pearson's logbook included the transfer of Commando Raiders, fresh from Nam Phong (T-712) training, to PS-44 on the 16<sup>th</sup>, to prepare for future missions; <sup>14</sup> orbits from Udorn to gather information from the Vinh tap on the 25<sup>th</sup>; and work out of Pakse for the Cambodian High Tail

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<sup>13</sup> CIA Bulletin, 07/06/73, North Vietnam-Laos.

<sup>14</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, Despite some of the U.S. Special Forces units rotating from Nam Phong to the original base at Lopburi, the base was busy preparing for the repatriation of Thai battalions from Laos.

operation on the 28th, 29th, and 30th of July. <sup>15</sup>

## **JARINA CONTINUES WORK IN MR-2**

Emphasis to supply and improve local positions in and around Long Tieng and Sam Tong continued unabated by as many helicopters and crews as Air America operations could provide.

On 11 July, Mike accomplished a one plus fifty-five hour, and fifteen landing proficiency check with CPH Marius Burke and Flight Mechanic Veda in Papa Foxtrot Juliet.

Three days later, scheduled to work at Long Tieng, Mike deadheaded north on C-130 768. Adverse weather prevented landing there, so after a few attempts the plane's crew turned south and landed at Wattay Airport, where Mike RON.

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<sup>15</sup> Jim Pearson logbook entries from 2 July-30 July 1973. Not much was included in Pearson's remarks section. Al Cates' July logbook entries reflect considerable night work at Savannakhet from the 6th-9th and Pakse on the 20th, 25th and 26th, but the log is not forthcoming as to its nature. Still, it can be assumed that additional Special Project work continued in my absence.

For information regarding Air America participation in the High Tail Cambodian operation see page 243 footnote #9.

John Pratt, *Vietnam Voices*, Viking, 1984, 574.

*"The hue and cry raised in the U.S. against the continuation of U.S. air strikes in Cambodia was finally transformed into [Congressional] legislation which terminated all funding of acts of force by the U.S. in SEA on 15 August 1973. This debate had been ongoing [in Washington] for some time. The Congress had perceived the President could, without too much difficulty, order the air forces to continue bombing even without waiting for a more satisfactory resolution of the constitutional issues raised by the Nixon Administration's interpretations of how the Paris Agreement was being enforced. Cut off all funds seemed the only way to terminate the war. Congress gave the OK for combat operations until [the August] date so Nixon could pursue negotiations with the communists..."*

Military curtailment of operations did not apply to Air America, which was funded by CIA. Jim Pearson's logbook reflects that High Tail information gathering from Cambodia continued, but except for occasional flights into Cambodia, likely from airspace high above the Lao border. There were night orbits conducted on 25 and 26 August. These continued sporadically through September and October 1973, and then abruptly ceased.

Fifteen July, Mike and Bob Nobel crewed Juliet to The Alternate. After supporting local defensive positions for eight plus twenty hours, which included thirty minutes night, Mike and Nobs RON at Long Tieng.

A mid-July weather front continued to impact the area and no flying took place on Monday. The following day weather remained a regional issue restricting local flights (thirty-six landings) to only four-plus thirty hours.

Flying remained about the same on the 18th. During four plus forty hours, the crew of Papa Foxtrot Juliet supported local pads with thirty-seven landings. After two plus twenty hours effort and not a particularly good RON, Mike deadheaded to Udorn on Porter N359F.

By the 21st there was some improvement in the weather. Jarina, Larry Taylor, and Flight Mechanic Boon crewed 35F to Long Tieng. Working 20 Alternate and the local area, they logged six-plus thirty hours and forty-two landings before RON.

Sunday was a slow day until the afternoon. Then, flying only a little more than one fuel load (thirty-six landings), the crew returned to Udorn. (Four plus fifteen, fifty minutes night.)

Deadheading on Twinpac Papa Hotel Delta, Mike and Taylor returned to The Alternate on the 28th. Joining Gary Gentz in Papa Foxtrot Gulf and working late, they flew eight plus thirty-eight, forty-eight minutes night, and sixty-nine landings. Assignments included a trip to LS-260 before RON. The following day, trips included stops at Ban Na, Phou Khao, and Padong. (Six plus fifty, fifty-six landings.)

There were some crew changes effected on Tuesday. During the day Vaughn replaced Taylor and Velasquez replaced Gentz. (Six plus forty.)



"Peter," a prominent checkpoint near Site-20A that everyone knew. Fixed wing pilots radioed this position while preparing for landing at the site.

Author Collection.

Flight time was restricted on the last day of the month. Before deadheading home on 992, Mike only flew two plus five hours. The short shuttles netted thirty landings. <sup>16</sup>

The 31st marked a sad day, when the final Air America employee was killed by hostile fire. Captain Frank Thorsen and Denny Thomas were flying a photo mission just east of Khang Kho (UH 0926) in Volpar N9542Z. One round entered the cockpit and struck Thorsen in the head. Copilot Thomas took control of the aircraft and landed at a safe facility. <sup>17</sup>

### **PEACE AGREEMENT**

A 30 July editorial in the *Bangkok World Newspaper* was titled "The Laos Agreement"

*"The peace agreement in Laos is a step, if not a leap forward.*

*It has taken five months for it to be reached-five months of civil war, five months of bombing. <sup>18</sup> It is with this in mind that the newest treaty must be treated as a welcome event.*

*Laos is one of the most artificially created countries in the world. Leaving the French union in 1956, her three million people are more aware of kinship to clan and family than nation. Forcing them to defend vaguely defined concepts of nationalism and internationalism was one of the great follies in the Indochina conflict. So unwarlike are the Laotians, in fact, that in the early days of the fighting, American officials complained that troops were firing their guns at a thirty-degree angle*

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<sup>16</sup> Mike Jarina Interviews.

<sup>17</sup> Joe Leeker, *The Aircraft of Air America, Volpar N9542Z.* To my knowledge, Thorsen was the third Air America pilot killed by the infamous and legendary "One Shot Charlie."

<sup>18</sup> Civil War: This is a misconception. Aided and abetted by several nations, the wars in Laos could be construed as anything but a civil war.



Looking north toward an abandoned Sam Tong complex from overhead Skyline Drive. The prominent karst to the south of the runway is visible. The dirt road was the first one built using USAID funds to connect Site-20 with Long Tieng. Ban Na was located north of the first two sets of ridgelines toward the Plain of Jars.

Author Collection.

because they didn't want to kill anything.<sup>19</sup> The same passivity extended to the use of heavy artillery. It was only after the Americans patiently explained that, since they weren't aiming their shells at any particular person and thus were not personally killing them, did the Royal Army pursue the art of war with any enthusiasm.

There are those, perhaps even a majority, who view the peace agreement in the same light as most other peace agreements, that is, something to be broken and violated by both sides with depressing regularity. If this happens in Laos, it will be foolish for all. The agreement to be signed is fair. Although there is no clear winner or loser, if both parties are sincere in expounding peace, they can surely work toward that goal now. If the communist Neo Lao Hak Sat chafed under losing the Ministry of Interior, they can work out agricultural reform anyway since they choose ministers for economy and planning and, while the Vientiane side lost the post of Minister of Information, they retain the vital Ministry of Defense.

So it falls to the Laotians to make peace for themselves. One of the last clauses of the agreement states that all foreign forces must leave the country; a 'this means you' condition aimed at the various forces which over the years have taken up Laos' defense as their own.

As the view from Cambodia is grim, at least Laos is one part of Indochina which is finally working out peace for itself."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Buddhism v Animism: Buddhism, the religious philosophy of the mainstream Lao reluctance to kill any living thing did not apply to Meo warriors, and other Lao tribal units.

<sup>20</sup> This *Bangkok World* editorial was disseminated as a message text from the American Embassy Vientiane to the Secretary of State in Washington, D.C. It was also copied to the Bangkok, Phnom Penh, and Saigon embassies on 07/31/73.



Negotiations proceeded at a typical Asian snail's pace. On 1 August, a tentative agreement resulted in the neutralization of Luang Prabang and Vientiane. Under the agreement, each of the two factions would be allowed to house one infantry battalion and 1000 police in Vientiane, and two infantry companies and 500 police in the royal capital. The Vientiane government, and by proxy, USG would supply the quarters, vehicles, communications, and rations for the units. <sup>21</sup>

Dialogue continued within the U.S State Department regarding the latest Lao negotiations and protocols:

*"Premature press reporting over the weekend gave the impression that the Lao negotiations had been completed and that the protocol signing and formation of a new coalition governments would take place this week. It now appears that the jostling for advantage within the agreed terms during the final drafting will last until next week. Investiture of the new coalition government would take place about ten days to two weeks later.*

*All major issues have generally been settled and it appears that the terms are somewhat better than anticipated. Critics of the February Agreement who were expected to attempt to block the final signing of the protocols have thus been robbed of their most potent issue-that Souvanna is 'selling out.' Souvanna's actions to neutralize his critics, coupled with the sudden LPF [Lao Patriotic Front] readiness to reach agreement, have combined to enhance the prospects for the settlement and new government.*

*After it is formed, the most immediate trouble could arise from the presence of PPF troops brought in to 'neutralize' the capitals of Vientiane and Luang Prabang. It would be easy for*

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<sup>21</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 406.  
Oudone Sananikone, *CHECO*, 151.

*disgruntled elements of the Lao army to create an incident which would justify their claim that the presence of LPF troops is intolerable.* <sup>22</sup>

*Souvanna has assured us that our interests in matters such as MIA resolution, provision of military assistance, foreign force withdrawal, etc., have been protected. We will not be certain of how well, until the text of the agreement is completed and available.*

*Once the new government is formed, we will be required to make basic decisions on our aid programs. Phoumi has sought assurances that the benefits of our air will not be limited to RLG areas. The Charge has avoided a direct response primarily because the LPF originally seemed to be seeking to establish a sealed zone which would formalize the division of the country. This stance has now relaxed somewhat. Souvanna can be counted upon to take every possible action to re-establish unity and may seek to use our air as a tool in doing so.*

*This would be in our interest. In addition to encouraging unity, channeling country-wide air through the PGNU [Provisional Government of National Union] would make it more difficult for Congressional critics to preclude aid to the LPF as in the case of North Vietnam.*

*The question of military aid is more complex. Integration of the two military forces will probably be among the last steps taken. In the interim the Lao Army has received about as much material as it can absorb. Ammunition stocks are adequate. With the ministry of Defense in RLG hands we will probably be able to continue to provide consumables. We will have to await the final*

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<sup>22</sup> Bilateral neutralization was not without precedent. Multi-faction troop patrolling in Vientiane had been attempted before and had not worked.

text to know if the LPF is to have an effective veto over our military assistance.

The only presently known portfolio assignment on the LPF side is LPF Chairman Souphanouvong as Deputy Premier and Foreign Minister. As such he will probably rapidly come to assume a role as spokesman for Laos. While this is bound to affect our former relationship with the RLG (in the person of Souvanna), the conciliatory attitude shown by the LPF negotiators in discussions with Charge Dean indicates that the LPF will not make excessive use of the available forum to denounce the U.S. and seek our removal from Laos. With the hostilities ended and the coalition government formed, the Soviet Union and China will be free to resume their competition for influence in area and neither Souvanna nor Souphanouvong will have any hesitation if cooperating or seeking to benefit therefrom.

Several issues will be papered over by the expected agreement, but the dramatic LPF willingness to compromise has given Souvanna better terms than expected. Souvanna is taking advantage of this development to neutralize effectively his critics who would forestall coalition. The prospects are good that the government will be formed and, in its own Lao way, begin to function effectively. If the North Vietnamese withdraw sufficiently to satisfy to satisfy appearances, Laos will be effectively 'neutralized.' At this point, however, it would be wise for us to limit our comments to expressing satisfaction over the rapid progress recently reported." <sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Office of the Historian, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume 10, Vietnam, January 1973-1975. Information Memorandum from the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs (Hummel) to Secretary of State Rogers, #96, Status of Lao Negotiations and What can be Expected from the Lao Protocols, Washington 08/02/73.

Like the failed Vietnamization policy in South Vietnam for South Vietnamese troops, the same strategy was envisioned for the Royal Lao Army (RLA). Realistically, from the start it was recognized that this would never be successful. Despite years of training, advising, and support, the regular Lao army was never, and would never be, capable of fending for itself against the stronger and more disciplined North Vietnamese Army. Moreover, with CIA's wind down, the same was in store for the country's irregular forces.

February's tentative peace agreement led to changes in the Royal Lao Army and Royal Air Force. During early realignment and the consolidation months, FAR battalions were fixed at 350 troops; Lao UH-34D training was relocated to Savannakhet; C-123K training continued with Air America IPs; and FAC observation and strike coordination duties were turned over to Lao pilots. <sup>24</sup>

Hoping to obfuscate disparate irregular forces (Lao and Thai) from regular troops to counter Pathet Lao demands "*that all irregulars be demobilized prior to formation of a coalition government,*" organizational names were changed.

Arguably containing the best SGU forces in the country, in Military Region Three weapons were inventoried for disposition. Irregular support was phased out except for a small facility at Whiskey Three for CIA-controlled Commando Raider operations. <sup>25</sup>

At Long Tieng, human CIA resources were reduced to a minimum, but still larger than the early days of only Case Officers Vint Lawrence and Tony Poe. Kayak, Bamboo, and Dutch had departed the valley, along with many of the support people. No one was replaced. Zack, Hog, Clean, Mule, and a few administrative officers remained at Long Tieng to work with the Meo.

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<sup>24</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 403.

<sup>25</sup> Ken Conboy, 403, 405.

In late July, the unit received a message from Chief of Station (COS) Daniel C. Arnold, who had replaced Hugh Tovar during May. The message indicated that The Alternate unit was to begin disarming the Meo. This was considered unrealistic, as Chief of Unit (COU) Zack indicated to his boss in Vientiane.

Another message arrived requesting a schedule of departure of everyone in the valley, except for Hog and a support officer. When no follow-up letter was received, Arnold was flown north to talk to the group. The COS attempted to convince the Case Officers that the war was over, and they should leave--the Meo would be fine.

At this time, the men were busy dismantling equipment, drawing boundaries under Meo control, and completing reports relating to intelligence matters. 26

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<sup>26</sup> Jim "Mule" Parker.

*"We arrived back here [Bangkok by the 3rd; Udorn on the 6th] in pretty good shape after an uneventful trip..*

*There has been some cutting of personnel here and probably more to come. No one really knows what will happen, so there is no sense speculating about it.*

*Nothing has changed around the house except Tuie's aunt painted part of the front and replaced some defective screening. She will probably want to charge us higher rent because of this.*

*My car battery was dead [one tire was almost flat] so I had to have it charged at the base..."<sup>1</sup>*

Letter Home, 08/08/73.

Another letter followed on 11 August to my cousin Colonel Robert Anderson, Chaplain USA, who was about to embark on an accompanied tour in Alaska:

*"...Nothing has changed except the work is a bit slow now. I went through a period like this in 1962, so I will make no predictions now.*

*We really enjoyed our stay in the States...Everyone speaks about the cost of living in the States now, but they don't realize that this increased cost is prevalent throughout the world. We have had a devalued baht since we were on leave that will cost us four percent more to live. Inflation in Thailand has far exceeded anything the U.S. is likely to see. It is all relative to the place you live I suppose."*

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<sup>1</sup>After leaving the Cortina at former Prime Minister Pibun wife's house in Bangkok during home leave one year, even though the vehicle was not supposed to be driven, it was. Therefore, I decided the car would be more secure and less abused if parked at the Air America facility.

**I** began flying S-58Ts again on 9 August. Hal Augustine and I departed Udorn early in Twinpac XW-PHA for Ubon, Thailand, where an engine recovery for 686 awaited. <sup>2</sup>

After completing the lift mission, I visited Tuie's cousin Noi and her husband Bob. Bob worked for the State Department and was in charge of USAF base housing. Noi was carrying another child, and a concerned Khun Yai spent a lot of time away from Udorn attending to her daughter. I was back in Udorn by late afternoon. (Four plus three-seven, two landings.)

Sunday afternoon, after two days off the flight schedule, I deadheaded to PS-44 with Captain Jim Pearson and Barney Heidt, who drove Twin Otter 868. Consuming two plus two hours, and after conducting one stop at Pakse to drop off a passenger, we arrived late at our destination. <sup>3</sup>

Following dinner, I joined Scratch Kanach, Deak Kennedy, and Chuck Low in Papa Hotel Bravo to conduct one hour and forty minutes refresher night training, and ten landings in preparation for planned Special Project work. On the 13<sup>th</sup>, I flew a short morning hop with Lloyd Higgins and Chuck Low before

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<sup>2</sup> The heading and distance from Udorn to Ubon was 136 degrees, 172 nautical miles. Trips of this duration across Thai territory required contacting various USAF tactical radar stations (ground control approach GCI) units of Brigham (Udorn), Invert (NKP if possible), and Lion (Ubon) for positive identification and identification friend or foe (IFF) codes. Contact depended largely on altitude, which rarely included more than fifty miles coverage for helicopters.

<sup>3</sup> Jim Pearson FEPA logbook for early August 1973 and Email. Jim remained busy supplying teams along the Trail system and also relaying messages from teams to the Agency radio operator. Using NVGs, at 200 feet AGL, he flew at high speed to record the number of vehicles moving south. In addition to this special night work, he trained Connelly and Frank Renigar for the Otter program.

returning Papa Hotel Bravo to Udorn. (Three plus fifteen, five landings.)

Apparently, while I was on home leave, CPH Marius Burke had undergone SIC transition training in the S-58T, and had been cleared for Special Project work. On the 18th we checked in to the Udorn facility at 1430 hours to provide late night cover for a Chinook road watch mission out of Savannakhet. After arriving at the Lima-39 airfield and parking Papa Hotel Alpha, the Company Jeep driver took us to the hostel for dinner. The infiltration mission was successful and we recovered at Udorn at 2305 hours. (Three plus forty-five, two plus fifteen night, ten landings.) It marked the first time I had performed a mission with Marius Burke in the cockpit.

Following a meritorious day off the schedule, I stood by at home for phase two of the Savannakhet road watch mission.

### **THE MA COUP ATTEMPT**

Not all Lao FAR officers were convinced that the August neutralization agreement between opposing parties was beneficial to their country's future. Therefore, seeking advice and solace regarding the situation, several journeyed to Bangkok. What unfolded was the last of many Lao military coups either attempted or implemented in the administrative capital.

Apparently, a plan was hatched in Thailand. Early on the 20th, exiled General Ma, former commander of the RLAF, crossed the Mekong with a handful of loyal pilots and several dozen men. Finding those of like mind at Wattay Airport, they occupied the airfield with ease. Others rushed into town to seize important venues. Within a short time, the radio station and national bank were in rebel hands. Efforts to capture Souvanna Phouma at his home failed, for, heeding rumor of an alleged plot, the Prime Minister was not home.



Ma and his pilots appropriated weaponized T-28s, and began hammering pre-planned sites. One target was General Kouprasith Abbay's villa at the army base. There had been bad blood between Ma and Kouprasith from the middle sixties, and this was a form of payback for past grievances. The villa was destroyed, but, as with the Prime Minister, General Kouprasith was not at the residence.

Ma's plane was hit. With his ship crippled by gunfire, he recovered at Wattay Airport, but was captured. Within a short time, Ma was summarily executed.

With Ma dead, the coup was generally over by 1100 hours. The coup evaporated, and the remaining supporters either fled or crossed the river into Thailand. <sup>4</sup>

Agency intelligence analysts assessed the situation:

*"The abortive coup..by exiled former air force commander General Ma, failed to attract support from right-wing elements in Laos.*

*General Ma has resided in Bangkok since October 1966 when he led a similarly unsuccessful coup attempt against the Souvanna government. Although the precise origins of his ill-conceived action are not clear, its obvious purpose was to sabotage the political accord being worked out between the government and the communists. Ma probably hoped that right-wing dissatisfaction with the terms negotiated by Souvanna would cause military and political rightists to rally to his side. Leading rightist cabinet minister Sisouk, however, quickly expressed his support for the Prime Minister as did Lao Army commander General Bounpone and deputy commander General Kouprasith.*

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<sup>4</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 406-407.

Government forces regained control of Vientiane's radio station and airfield several hours after they had been seized by dissidents. According to fragmentary information, Ma's company sized force crossed into Laos from Thailand and commandeered several T-28 aircraft which were used to strafe and bomb a Lao Army camp [Chinaimo] on the outskirts of the capital. The coup force has been either killed, captured, or scattered and General Ma reportedly has been executed by a Lao Army officer. <sup>5</sup>

Agency analysis about the incident continued the next day:

"The collapse of General Ma's effort to overturn the government may strengthen Prime Minister Souvanna's hand in wrapping up a settlement in Laos. In the early moments of the coup attempt, the U.S. charge strongly opposed General Ma's action in conversations with both the plotters themselves and key rightist political and military leaders. His words may have been instrumental in discouraging defections to Ma's side. More importantly, they left the rightists with no illusions as to the firmness of U.S. backing for Souvanna and his efforts to form a new coalition government.

Souvanna almost certainly will use the new momentum he has gained from this incident to urge a quick end to right-wing vacillation and opposition regarding the draft accord. The rightists probably will continue to hold out for revisions in the agreement for as long as possible. Nevertheless, they may not realize that a breakdown in negotiations and the consequent resignation of Souvanna would leave the non-communist side in an untenable political and military position.

Senior communist negotiator Phoumi Vongvichit, in a conversation with the U.S. charge, has expressed gratification

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<sup>5</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 08/20/73.

for the support provided Souvanna by the U.S., stating that the incident 'had clarified the situation' for the communists.

Souvanna suspects that Ma's abortive coup was part of a plot to return former rightist strongman Phoumi Nosavan to power. Phoumi, an inveterate plotter, has been residing in exile in Bangkok since 1965 and may well have been involve, or given his blessing to Ma's ill-considered action." <sup>6</sup>

**"The coup in Vientiane didn't amount to much and the leader [Ma], who I never thought much of, was executed on the spot after he crashed. He pulled this stunt before and killed a bunch of people, so good riddance to rubbish.**

**There are rumors of a [bilateral] signing in Laos but it never seems to materialize. In the meantime, we still continue to cut back [on personnel]. It is the old shuffle and reshuffle as nobody really knows what is happening. I think we will have a job until the final bell."**

Letter Home, 08/28/73.

The day after the coup attempt, Captain Marius Burke, Flight Mechanic Tom Neis, and I ferried Papa Hotel Echo to Lima-39 to provide cover for the Chinook crew extracting one team inserted on the 18<sup>th</sup>, and inserting a fresh unit. After mission completion, we recovered at Pakse for the night. (Four plus forty-five, three plus forty night, five landings.)

On the 22<sup>nd</sup>, Jim Pearson and Frank Renigar flew 74M to Savannakhet in order to check the inserted team's progress and relay information of note to Lima-39 COS office. (Three plus

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<sup>6</sup> CIA Bulletin, Laos, 08/21/73.

twelve, twenty-seven minutes night, thirty minutes instrument, four landings.) <sup>7</sup>

RONing at PS-44 for the next two days, we began an accelerated training phase emphasizing crew coordination, LORAN navigation, rough area landings, and night work to remain proficient, and prepare for upcoming missions. The first night, while flying locally, the left engine fire warning light illuminated. I was wearing NVG, so the red light embedded in the "T" handle hindered my vision. Nevertheless, I was able to land immediately on a ridgeline close to the base. Neis opened the clamshell doors and soon determined that there was no problem. There had been a glitch in the sensitive fire detection system, and the exercise provided Burke an excellent example of what could happen during night flying in the dreaded black air. (Five plus thirty-five, fifty-five minutes night, ten landings.) <sup>8</sup> Thursday the 23<sup>rd</sup> was more of the same, but devoid of incidents. (Four plus twenty, fifty-three minutes night, ten landing.) The next day we trained, and RTB late to Udorn by 1930 hours. (Five plus twenty-seven, thirty-seven minutes night, ten landings.)

## JARINA

Mike Jarina continued working in Military Region Two relocating refugees and supporting defensive positions.

On the 12th, Jarina, Green, Bundit (called Bandit) Boonreung, and Hal Augustine (the trainer) crewed 13F to The

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<sup>7</sup> Jim Pearson log entry for 06/22/73.

<sup>8</sup> A fire detector sensor was installed in each power section stainless steel firewall and wired to the cockpit. "T" handles for each engine were installed in the upper instrument console. When pulled, fuel was shut off at the selected fuel control and a fire extinguisher was activated in the affected power section. The "T" handles had originally been fitted with white lenses, until a night incident at PS-44 revealed white light to be detrimental to night vision devices. To minimize this problem, the lenses were replaced with less invasive red lenses.

Alternate. More and more Thai men were being utilized to crew helicopters. The policy began slowly, first in H-34s, and then gravitated to Bells. <sup>9</sup>

It was a short day because of continuing monsoon conditions in the mountains. Besides working locally, one trip was assigned west to the FAR Sala Phou Khoun (LS-260) site. Except for Augustine, who went home, the men RON at Long Tieng. (Five plus three, twenty minutes night, forty-three landings.) The next day, the crew was restricted from much flying by adverse weather. Jarina, an experienced weather pilot managed short flights east to Padong (LS-05) and Pha Phai (LS-65). They RON at Long Tieng. (Four plus fifty-one, two landings.)

Tuesday morning, Cliff Hendrix replaced Green, and the weather cleared somewhat, allowing refugee work between Ban Nam Song (LS-363) and the large refugee community at Moung Cha (LS-113), and the surrounding area. (Seven plus five, forty-five minutes night, fifty-seven landings.) Relieved the next day, Mike returned to Vientiane on 404 and Udorn on 998.

On the 19<sup>th</sup>, Jarina deadheaded to 20A on Papa Foxtrot Gulf. He joined new Thai Flight Mechanic Chalaw and his trainer Tod Yourgliche on 12F. The weather had improved, and Mike logged eight plus fifty hours before securing and RONing at The Alternate.

While the Ma coup unfolded in Vientiane, Jarina and crew were performing mostly local missions, flights to Padong, and

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<sup>9</sup> Former Thai air force mechanics Suribongse and Champanil were hired by Air America in early 1965 and began crewing H-34s. They proved to be outstanding mechanics, and, as opposed to some older Filipino Flight Mechanics, spoke intelligible English. Mike Jarina Email. Mike called Bundit "Bandit." On one mission Bundit observed heavy frost on the ground. Shouting "snow-snow," he asked Mike to land so he could look at and touch something he had never seen before. Mike enjoyed seeing Bundit experiencing frost for the first time. Jarina indicated that the Thai mechanics were good people and very enthusiastic.

much further east to Site-363. (Seven plus ten, sixty-four landings.)

The 21st finally provided good flight time. (Nine plus ten, fifteen minutes night.) During the long day, the crew of 12F shuttled between Padong and LS-363.

During the monsoon season one had to accept the good with the bad. On Wednesday, adverse weather cut the previous day's work in half. (Four plus forty-three, twenty-four landings.) Moreover, with little else to do, downtime added to boredom in the Long Tieng Valley.

New Flight Mechanic Sirichai and trainer Veda replaced Chalaw and Yourglich. Mike only flew one plus five, and four landings to Ban Na (LS-15) before deadheading to L08 on 787 and T08 on Caribou 2389.

On the 25<sup>th</sup>, H-34 and Bell program administrator Hal Miller joined Jarina in 12F to conduct a route check. Thai Flight Mechanic training continued with Sirichai and Tawai. Flights were conducted from Long Tieng to Padong, Site-65, Ban Na, and Site-363. Miller went home and the crew RON.

Adverse weather curtailed flying on Sunday. RON. Military Region Two flying remained low. After an aircraft change to 35F, Jarina, Sirichai, Pranat, and trainer Barrow flew missions to Ban Na and Pha Phai. (Four plus fifty-eight, thirty-four landings.)

The weather improved slightly on the 28th. Musical mechanics continued, with Pranat and his trainer Velasquez assuming the cabin section duty. Flights and shuttles were conducted to Site-65 and Ban Nam Yon Nea (LS-307) in the Phou Xang area, six miles northwest of Ban Nam Moh an original and large refugee area, located south of Long Tieng, on the east side of the Nam Ngum. (Six plus forty-three, thirty-five minutes night, forty-eight landings.) Following an RON, Jarina



Lao Theung refugees at a remote outlying site receiving supplies and seed rice.

Author Collection.



The largely abandoned Ban Na (LS-15) site. This position was an original Momentum site, used to accommodate refugees, and train and garrison Meo warriors. Scars of the 1971 battle are largely overgrown by the effects of Mother Nature. During the siege of Long Tieng, Ban Na became a strategic last stand site by a Thai infantry and artillery force, which included a Puncher artillery fire support base. Air America Bell helicopter crews endured many stressful moments supporting the doomed operation.

Author Collection.



departed the next day for Udorn. <sup>10</sup>

After I returned from PS-44, I began a mini-pilot training phase. Assigned XW-PHD, on the morning of the 26th I conducted a proficiency check with Brian Johnson, and Deak Kennedy as our Flight Mechanic. (Two plus ten IP.) This was followed by afternoon transition training for Tony Byrne, with Bill Long down below. (One plus fifty-five IP, total of ten landings.) Byrne had been assigned to the Chinook program, but, as a senior pilot, opted for Twinpacs. Training continued the next afternoon with Byrne and Kennedy. (Two plus twenty-five IP, ten landings.)

My month of flying ended two days later with an afternoon with Tony Byrne and Tom Neis on training flight. (One plus twenty-five, five landings.) The short month lent itself to low flight time.

Departing Udorn before sunrise on the 25th, Jim Pearson and Jake Wehrell returned to Pakse to conduct all day and night orbits. (Eleven plus twenty-eight, two plus thirty-one night, three plus thirty instrument, two landings.) They RON at the Air America hostel.

Orbits continued the following day in auxiliary fuel tank-equipped 9EX. The crew recovered at T-08. (Eleven plus fifty-three, One seven-night, three hours instrument, two landings.) <sup>11</sup>

## **FORNEY'S DEPARTURE FROM SEA**

*"The Forney's are finally leaving. Jack has been assigned to Washington. People are bailing out of here very fast now.*

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<sup>10</sup> Mike Jarina interviews and flight records.

<sup>11</sup> Jim Pearson flight log entry, 08/25-26/73. Since Jim's logs are not definitive, I am not certain, but believe these flights could have been associated with the Cambodian operation.

***This was to be expected. We will remain until the end unless something drastic happens to change my mind."***

Letter to Jim Moore in Bangkok, 08/29/73.

Before the Forney family departed Udorn for Washington, the Air America overseas operation was winding down, Jack worked with Judy Porter creating a photograph brochure of base capabilities and aircraft for presentations to companies interested in purchasing Air America's overseas assets. Jack conducted tours and briefings for interested companies like Northrop Lockheed, Boeing, E-Systems, Bill Lear, and others.<sup>12</sup>

Jack elected to leave because the war was obviously all but over. The operation was to be disbanded, and nobody of interest to him was going to buy the Southeast Asian operation. Moreover, Hugh Grundy had been replaced by the quintessential bureaucrat, Paul Velte, who Jack considered a personality even more abrasive than George Doole. Southern Air Transport (SAT) was an option, but it was still a "sneaky Pete" operation that did not offer him an opportunity that he could obtain elsewhere. E-Systems provided another option, but if he was going to switch companies, then he would go stateside for a time.<sup>13</sup>

There were other reasons for leaving. His children were approaching high school age, and he would have to establish them in a boarding school if he and Judy remained overseas.

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<sup>12</sup> CJ Abadie Email, 02/12/99. "The Agency wanted to keep the assets and knew that it could not continue in Thailand after the events in Vietnam concluded, and the general attitude of the Thai and Lao governments toward our operations. We made a brochure which showed our aircraft and their capabilities and some of the photos showed up in the Log. Judy Porter took most of the photos and many of our employees...We were trying to interest other agencies in using our capabilities in those areas or other parts of the world.

<sup>13</sup> E-Systems purchased the Tainan, Taiwan, maintenance operation. However, the company's Asian operation only lasted a few years, and E-Systems was eventually purchased by another company.

Forney worked out of the Washington K Street office for about a year until returning to Tainan, Taiwan in 1974. He was involved in the North American end of Twinpac affairs, as well as other matters. He worked directly for the Company president and saw most of what he did, keeping up well with what was going on, though he had little direct association with events in the field.

During this interim period, Jack and others journeyed to the Pratt and Whitney plant in Montreal, Canada, a number of times, attempting to solve the Twinpac engine compressor surging problems.

Pratt and Whitney had been testing three offending engines sent from the Udorn inventory, and insisted they could find nothing wrong with the power sections. It was winter in the Northern hemisphere, generally the most favorable engine operating conditions. After several days of observing the testing and talking with repair engineers, including Ken Hopkins, Jack persuaded them to assess one engine in an environmentally controlled test cell that approximated the high-density altitude conditions encountered in Laos. After several attempts, one engine belched emphatically, and all agreed something was amiss. Some luck was involved in the process, for the test cell was unable to exactly reproduce climatic conditions encountered in Southeast Asia.

The problem was eventually traced to compressor wear resulting from dust particle scouring of the outlet plenum flanges. In cold, low altitude conditions and Canadian dense air, the gap at the diffuser/compressor/combustion chamber interfaces could be greater (and within P&W repair limits) than in hot relatively thinner air full of moisture. The resulting engine wear did not register for P&W because they were testing

the power sections in their environment, not those encountered in Indochina.

Reflecting on his extensive time in Asia, Jack Forney recalled:

*"When I first went over, aviation was the cutting-edge technology for Asia and the Pacific Rim and we big noses were the princes of it all. The economies were all in the dumps and the dollar was king..., we were hiring Chinese and Filipino engineers for 100-200 [dollars] a month and house servants for \$25 or less...American pay was good and taxes were minimal. The traffic was not so bad, the housing and food were good, even on the [local] economy and the amenities were great if you were an American. TWA round the world trips could be had for \$200 and places like Hong Kong, Singapore, Penang were short commutes. Saigon before 1964 was one of the greatest cities in Asia, in my opinion, and I preferred going there to Tokyo..."*<sup>14</sup>

## **FLOODING**

*"I guess Mom gave you a report on the flood that did not do any material harm to us. I could only get six blocks from home and turned around and got back in the nick of time. Did not get to work until the next day...The scars are still evident in and around North Plainfield and Watchung."*

Letter from Home, 09/09/73.

*"Now you know what it is to have a good flood. We had ours several years ago [in 1966]..."*

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<sup>14</sup> Jack Forney Emails, 06/03/99, 07/07/99, 07/19/99.  
Jack enjoyed living overseas. Between the South Pacific and Asia, he and Judy lived there for seventeen years.

*We haven't had much rain right in Udorn, but the threat is there as the skies are always cloudy. In the mountains it has been very rainy.*

*We have been breeding tadpoles. Ricky discovered them in our fishpond and instigated the interest.."*

Letter Home, 08/28/73.

Like every monsoon season, because of a serious flooding threat to people and property, the Mekong River had to be monitored very closely by those living and working in and around Vientiane. On 29 August, the Vice President of the Air America Lao Division sent a message to the Chief Executive Officer in Washington regarding potential flooding in the capital and measures taken to minimize losses:

*"We have flown away all aircraft from Vientiane to Udorn this afternoon, in the absence of anything approaching an authoritative estimate of what the Mekong River is going to do. The [parking] ramp is clean, with four C-123Ks recovering at Udorn, along with C-7A training birds and PC6C spares, which have effectively been 'depositioned' to Udorn.*

*The river hovers...above the flood stage, with lowland flooding, and the major concern, prompting the flyoff, was the weakness in the levees between the airfield and the river on property occupied by the Lao Army Transportation Corps and the RLAF. The main gate at Wattay has been sealed off with the sand-filled oil drums and sandbags and the entrances to operations and administration buildings have been sealed with cinder blocks against a dike rupture in the night.*

*CASI has been taking similar precautions, but they will probably end up on our ramp if the deluge comes following a*

*levee break. The river is unpredictable..."*<sup>15</sup>

A follow-up message was sent to Washington and throughout the Asian system on 7 September:

*"Just when we were congratulating ourselves that we were out of danger as far as a flood this year was concerned, the Mekong started back up again. Having dropped..., it is now back up to...and slowly rising. In addition, tropical storm 'Louise' is heading straight for northern Laos to make its contribution of rain to the already saturated landscape.*

*The reading at LPQ today is up about a meter, which will give us rising water in the next two days or so, even without the tropical storm...*

*Thus far there has been no impairment of operations at the airfield and commercial flights are arriving as usual..."*<sup>16</sup>

There was no further reference to flooding.

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<sup>15</sup> Air America message to the CEO Washington office and all stations, Flooding in Vientiane, 08/29/73.

<sup>16</sup> To Chief Executive Officer Washington, Mekong River Status Report, 09/07/73.

**O**n the first I continued local upgrade training with Tony Byrne. With Flight Mechanic Tom Neis crewing Papa Hotel Echo, we conducted both morning and afternoon sessions. (Four plus thirty IP, and ten landings demonstrating maneuvers.)

Four September, Tom Grady, Bill Long, and I checked into Air America at 1400 to fly XW-PHB during a late-night mission out of Pakse. At AB-1, we learned that we would be covering Jim Pearson and Jake Wehrell (DOH 6/13/65) who, crewing Twin Otter N6868, would conduct Trail missions along the eastern border. (Four plus thirteen night.)

After dinner at the Air America hostel, we waited until receiving a call from Air Operations alerting us that Pearson was inbound from Udorn, that we should depart for the airfield, and prepare to launch. Using LORAN coordinates, and equipped with NVG, I stuck to established protocol, orbiting at sufficient altitude to maintain a line of sight to establish radio contact. The mission was uneventful, and we recovered at T-08 just after midnight. (Five plus thirty-eight, three-forty night, two landings.)

Pressure was increasing to provide intelligence related to North Vietnamese intentions in Laos, so clandestine Otter Trail missions continued on the sixth. CPH Marius Burke, our Flight Mechanic, and I checked in to operations at 1313 hours to crew Papa Hotel Alpha. We were again assigned to provide SAR coverage for Jim Pearson and Olsen, who were tasked to conduct high-speed visual reconnaissance and count vehicles on logistic byways in Military Region Four into South Vietnam. (Five plus fifty-three, Four plus two night, two landings.) We chocked into the Udorn

facility at 2305. <sup>1</sup> Perhaps because of the typhoon and the peace process, except for a standby at home, I was then off the schedule for several days.

Resuming flying on the twelfth, using Papa Hotel Bravo, Chuck Low and I ferried Brigadier General Trefry to Wattay Airport for early morning meetings at the U.S Embassy. We spent two and a half hours on the ramp baking in the hot sun, and waiting for the general to arrive for the return trip to Udorn. (Two plus ten, four landings.) <sup>2</sup>

### **INCIDENT AT RAMASUN**

First recommended by Wayne Knight through an arrangement with the U.S. Army at Ramasun, for many years we had been authorized to use a sizeable chain-linked enclosed area adjacent to the Ramasun radio intercept facility to conduct pilot training, and avoid distracting high traffic at the Udorn airfield.

On the morning of the seventh, Bell Instructor Pilot Hal Miller was demonstrating an autorotation to Dick Theriault, with Bundit Boonreung as the Flight Mechanic. Something went seriously wrong during the recovery process, and Bell 204B N8535F's tail stinger and pylon impacted the ground hard. The tail rotor and gearbox separated. Loss of the anti-torque device caused the aircraft to spin right, the left skid to collapse, and the main rotor blades to contact the ground.

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Pearson FEPA logbook entries for 4 and 6 September 1973.

<sup>2</sup> Message State. For fiscal 1974, Laos was to receive only a fraction of the assistance to which it had grown accustomed, and air operations were to be handled by State with more rigid rules and regulations than the Department of Defense. Ambassador Charles Whitehouse, who replaced Mac Godley, was under orders to maintain a strong non-communist military posture within Laos despite dwindling air support.



An initial assessment judged 35F damage to be substantial, especially to both the airframe and rotor drive systems. The left landing gear was broken, the main transmission gearbox had broken loose at the mounting area and was bent forward to the left, and had penetrated into the cabin section. The main rotor blades separated. Besides the loss of the tail rotor and tail rotor gearbox, the left synchronized elevator was damaged and the left nose Plexiglas was shattered. Using ground transportation, plans were made by maintenance to return the aircraft to the Udorn facility.<sup>3</sup>

The damage to 35F, while described as substantial, was confined to the rear cross tube and some belly damage. The cross tube had collapsed on autorotation touchdown. Miller maintained that the touchdown was a little hard but, from his experience, definitely not hard enough to cause a cross tube to shear.

This incident revealed that the Tainan maintenance department was re-arching the Bell cross tubes beyond the number of times allowed by Bell Helicopter Company specifications. Bell allowed the tubes to be re-arched twice, if below certain spread limits. Over time, when another Bell evidenced the same problem as 35F, Wayne and those researching the cases discovered that some tubes in the system had been re-arched four or more times. Bell, or someone else performed tests on one of these multiple re-arched tubes and found that the metal had been crystallized and weakened beyond limits.

At times, arguments over the re-arching procedure became quite heated. The Bell factory maintenance procedure clearly limited re-arching. Air Asia supervisors at Tainan finally admitted that they had re-arched some tubes up to four times, in direct conflict with Bell Helicopter and FAA-approved

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<sup>3</sup> Air America XOXO, Marius Burke CP/RW, Bell 204 N8535F, 09/07/73.

procedures. <sup>4</sup>

## **JARINA AND MR-2 ASSIGNMENTS**

On the ninth, Mike Jarina, Larry Taylor, and Bundit Boonreung departed for Long Tieng in Papa Foxtrot Hotel after lunch. During the shortened day, the crew worked local defensive pads at The Alternate, and then were assigned to Padong and Pha Phai. (Four plus twenty, twenty-seven landings.) The upcountry stint would last for most of the next three days.

Work continued locally the next day at Site-20A and to the west in the Route-13 area at Sala Phou Khoun. (Eight plus fifteen, forty minutes night, sixty-seven landings.) Refugee work Tuesday was conducted between Pha Phai, Padong, and Moung Cha sites. (Eight plus forty, twenty-five minutes night.)

The twelfth was spent shuttling between Ban Na, Long Tieng, and Padong. (Seven plus thirty, fifty-eight landings.) After working locally at The Alternate the next day for seven plus thirty hours, Jarina switched to Papa Foxtrot Juliet for a ferry flight to Udorn. (One plus twenty-five.)

Using Bell 204 12F, Jarina commenced local instructor pilot training at the Udorn airfield on the fifteenth, with Marius Burke and John Greenway. (Four plus fifteen, forty-one landings.)

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<sup>4</sup> Wayne Knight Emails, 01/03/01, 01/05.01.

Intercompany letters and memorandums between Bell Helicopter Company and Air America Washington regarding the cross tube issue, 02/26/74, 03/08/74, 03/22/74.

Author Note: Prevarication and denial of certain items seemed to be the norm from the lips of some Tainan leaders attempting to protect their turf. The cross tube admission from Tainan tended to reinforce what I had heard and believed concerning the defective Lycoming fuel control units and governors the Air Asia overhaul division had placed back in service during the late 1960s. The repair unit was unwilling to admit failings. Fortunately, no one was ever killed in the process.

IP training in 12F continued the following day with Hal Miller flying with Jarina and Boonreung. (One plus fifteen, fifteen landings.) Probably as a result of the Bell incident at Ramasun, a third day of IP standardization training took place between Miller, Jarina, and with Bob Nobel crewing. (Fifty minutes.)

Deadheading on Papa Gulf Victor (PGV), Jarina returned upcountry on the 20th (One hour.) At The Alternate, he joined Fred Fram and Flight Mechanic Dord in Papa Foxtrot Gulf. He then worked the Long Tieng area and RON. (Five plus forty, thirty minutes night, fifty-three landings.) <sup>5</sup>

During a full day on the 21<sup>st</sup>, that included an incredible 103 landings, the crew supported Padong, Pha Phai, Moung Cha, and Ban Na. Boonreung replaced Dord. On Saturday the 22nd, Jarina, Boonreung, and Velasquez were assigned missions at Padong, Pha Phai, and Ban Na. (Eight plus thirty-five, eight-eight landings.) Jarina was relieved on Sunday. He caught a ride to Wattay Airport on 405 (thirty-two minutes) and to Udorn on 998. (Thirty-five minutes.)

Courtesy of 404's crew, Mike deadheaded upcountry on 26 September (forty-seven minutes) for his last two days on the flight schedule. At Long Tieng he joined Taylor, Latloi, and Velasquez on Papa Foxtrot Gulf. They worked to south at LS-360, west at Site-260, and north at Site-15. (Seventy-two landings.) Thursday, Fred Fram joined Jarina in the cockpit to support the Long Tieng area. Toward late afternoon they headed south for Udorn. (Eight plus fifty-five, thirty minutes night, ninety-three landings.)

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<sup>5</sup> Fred Fram eventually left Air America with his family to homestead in New Zealand.

**THE PEACE PROCESS**

*"The government accord was supposed to have been signed in Laos yesterday, so that means we have 60 days to pull everything out [this was later clarified]. Of course, we will and they won't. Some agreement! There is some speculation that December will be a critical month in Southeast Asia. If they [the communists] are going to roll us up that will be the time to do it."*

Letter Home, 09/15/73.

Protocols to the cease fire agreement were signed by both parties in Vientiane on 14 September. Some of the procedures included:

1. A provisional Government of National Union would be formed with a neutral Prime Minister and two deputies: one Pathet Lao (Lao People's Revolutionary Party-LPRP), one Vientiane government.
2. Government posts would be split between Pathet Lao and Vientiane people.
3. A political program based on the 1962 Geneva Agreements and the recommendations of the National Political Consultative Council.
4. The government would follow the unanimous decisions of the two parties in all important matters.
5. The officials in the cities of Vientiane and Luang Prabang, which would be neutralized, would be chosen by agreement between the two parties. A joint police force would be set up in the two cities, consisting of 1000 men from each side in Vientiane and 500 in Luang Prabang, and a battalion of troops from each side would be stationed in each city. Other armed

forces would be forbidden to enter them, and military aircraft would be forbidden to fly over these cities.

6. Provisional ceasefire lines would be established where the two sides' forces were in contact, and troop movements over these lines by land or air were prohibited. The armed forces and police were forbidden to take reprisals against persons who had collaborated with the other side.

7. Troops and military personnel of foreign countries must be withdrawn within sixty days from the formation of the Provisional Government...

8. Troops of both parties were forbidden to use Lao territory to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries.

9. Special forces organized and armed by other countries must be removed and their bases dismantled. Each party must release all soldiers and civilians taken prisoner during the hostilities within sixty days from the formation of the Provisional Government.

10. Refugees have the right to return to their villages. The two parties would form a mixed central commission to implement the agreement. The International Control Commission would continue its work in collaboration with the mixed commission. <sup>6</sup>

As soon as the peace agreement was reached, Thai Prime Minister, Thanom Kittikachorn forwarded a letter of congratulations to Prince Souvanna Phouma, expressing his hope that there would be bilateral cooperation in the development of Laos, and lasting peace achieved.

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<sup>6</sup> Both the Soviets and Chinese participated in the Pathet Lao troop lift to the neutralized cities. The number of AAA weapons was reduced on the Chinese-built Beng Valley highway. The Sam Neua Group 959 was disbanded. Most of the North Vietnamese 316 Division in Xieng Khouang Province withdrew to the DVR. In the Panhandle, three Vietnamese regiments departed Laos.

In talking with reporters on the 19<sup>th</sup>, the subject of the number of Thai mercenary troops in Laos was broached. Would they return home, and what kind of measures would be taken to provide work for them? <sup>7</sup>

Thanom replied:

*"The Thai government did not send them to fight but they crossed over on their own accord and volunteered to fight for the Lao government...the Thailand border is hundreds of kilometers long and people living along it have relatives in both countries...when they will be withdrawn is up to the Lao government, or it is the responsibility of persons who hired them to go and fight in Laos, not the responsibility of our government. The Lao government might stop hiring these Thais since it no longer needs them to fight for it."* <sup>8</sup>

*In regard to making preparations to provide work for these Thais when they return to Thailand, it will be necessary to know what kind of work they want and basic facts regarding their skill in various occupations first, in order to be able to give them aid properly and as desired. We do not know what occupations they were engaged in originally, whether they were farmers or planters, and whether they might intend to return to their original occupations."* <sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Like North Vietnam, Thai officials never admitted that they sent troops (or PARU) to Laos. From all outward appearances, the same policy remains in effect today.

<sup>8</sup> Thanom's statement was only partially true. As per USG policy, Thai irregulars were hired, trained, and totally supported by the Agency. However, regular Thai army officers commanded the men.

<sup>9</sup> Message text from the American Embassy Bangkok to the Secretary of State Washington, D.C., Thanom on Laos and Thai Volunteers, 09/24/73.

**HOSTILITIES PAY**

Preparations to correct and adjust crew pay were already underway prior to the signing of ceasefire agreements. Tom Ingles, Vice President of Industrial Relations disseminated an area/hostilities pay rate letter to all Udorn flight crewmembers on 7 September:

*"When the fixed wing aircraft previously based at Vientiane were transferred to Udorn effective 16 August 1973, it was intended that the crew members of these aircraft would continue to receive the existing area/hostilities pay rates established for Vientiane based aircraft. For the PC6, DHC6, and C7A aircraft, this holds true. However, since the Udorn VTB area/hostilities rates are different than the Vientiane VTB rates, crewmembers of former Vientiane based VTBs will receive the Udorn rates from 16 August 1973 through 15 September 1973 [what followed were pay rates designated for project and non-project flying]."*

The following day, Ingles issued a more definitive hostilities pay rate.

*"The Company has recently completed a study of hostilities pay factors and on the basis of information obtained from Vientiane and Udorn base management, the company has determined that there has been a substantial reduction in threats to flight operations directly attributable to actions by hostile forces. The company is therefore implementing revised hostilities pay rates effective 1 October 1973...[H500/S58T/Uh34 helicopter rates were 5.16/hour, Bell and CH-47 rates three dollars and eighty-five cents].*

*Area pay rates remained the same."* <sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Air America Vice President Industrial Relations (Thomas B. Ingles) to all Vientiane and Udorn Base U.S. Citizen Pilots, Hostilities Pay Rate Revisions.

Wayne Knight was involved in a rework of the project pay issue. He designed a system whereby project pay would be a percentage of flight time, differing for each aircraft type, and equal to the percent of hostile incidents reported to FIC in relation to total hours. This format could be reviewed monthly. As an example, in July, suppose the UH-34D program flew 3,000 hours, and 150 incidents were reported to FIC. The ratio of events to flying hours was five percent, so five percent of total H-34 hours for that period qualified for project pay.

Wayne believed his system would present a more equitable formula than any of the others previously employed, but he also admitted that, as the Author, he was biased. While the system, as well as any other, had inequities, it certainly allocated what project pay there was in a more deserving area--low flying aircraft. Some of the programs, such as C-46, Caribou, and so forth, dropped to almost no project pay. Helicopters rated highest. Wayne considered this a fair representation of the hazards actually faced. He had no input into the amount of pay per hour, just the method of determining the number of qualifying hours.

Wayne met a lot of resistance from CJ Abadie to this new form of project pay. He did not initially understand the formula, and thought the process would be too complicated. Abadie finally agreed after he fully understood it, and the procedure was introduced. It worked well for the short period of



operations that remained. <sup>11</sup>

## **AJAN PANOR**

By September, Knight was well established and comfortable in his Director of Operations billet. Generally restricted from flying, he had time for other pursuits. Therefore, along with his boss, CJ Abadie, he chose to hone his Thai language skills under Professor Panor for two semesters. (Both men were, or had been, married to Thai women.)

Panor, a long-time educator at the Teacher's College and the Udorn United States Information Service (USIS) library, had conducted a Thai language school for interested parties since the early sixties under the direction of Mrs. Perkins, whose husband was a Protestant missionary. <sup>12</sup> Years later she conducted part time advanced Thai classes at the University of Maryland branch at the USAF base. Abadie was often late completing his assigned homework, and sometimes finished it at his desk. As Abadie's office was next to Wayne's, he often called over with a question or two regarding an assignment.

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<sup>11</sup> Wayne Knight Emails, 01/03/01, 0105/01. He was involved on a rework of the project pay.

Regarding speculation concerning the peace process and continuance of the Udorn helicopter program: Over the next few months some people thought they had a future with Thai Am. Abadie and Knight were looking into the helicopter service in Bangkok. Wayne was very busy in non-flight matters and did not have a lot of time to think of what the future might hold. However, he was resigned to leaving Thailand. He thinks management believed the Lao truce was going to hold and be irreversible--no more need for Air America. All became resigned to the Air America adventure coming to an end.

<sup>12</sup> Tuie had studied American University Association (AUA) English courses at the USIS building across the street from City Park. Panor and Tuie's uncle Cha Tha Musagablert were close friends in school, so Ajan had an intimate connection with the Nisagonrungsee family. I last enjoyed her company at the Udorn U.S. Consul's residence during a very warm Fourth of July party in the 1970s.



Ajan Panor and Ricky Casterlin at the Nisagonrungsee house in Udorn, Thailand.

Author Collection.

During earlier years, Tuie's aunt had informed her that Panor reputedly had a crush on CJ Abadie. Knight was not aware of this, but knew that both he and Ab were her favorite students. Most of the other students were Air Force types in country for only a year, so the Air America duo had a definite advantage over them.

Panor was a good teacher, and Knight got to the point of being able to read a newspaper and write Thai, if only phonetically. Today he can still read and write some Thai. She also told the men about Ho Chi Minh residing in the Udorn area.

One had to be very careful attempting to vocalize Thai--for example the word fuck tong for squash. When using a word with five tones you could seriously err. So much of the language could be nasty if pronounced incorrectly (i.e. private body parts). <sup>13</sup> However, like most of us, he learned very early that any attempt to speak Thai by a farang was sincerely respected. Context was considered and he never recalled being embarrassed for using incorrect tonal inflections. <sup>14</sup>

## **THE FIELD**

*"...I am working a bit more now due to certain changes. We are still uncertain about the job and contracts as the agreement had been signed in Laos, but nothing has to be done until the*

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<sup>13</sup> To me, it was all very confusing and not worth the potential trouble. When Tuie was teaching rudimentary Thai to Air Force students, she warned her charges to be very careful when speaking Thai.

<sup>14</sup> Wayne Knight Emails. Wayne never learned to master the five tonal inflections, and had a very funny experience in Cairns, Australia years later. Two of his wife Lai's workmates from Civil Air Transport (CAT) were visiting. They took the ladies to lunch at a Thai restaurant, where Wayne suggested they might like to order his favorite dish Pat (Pad) Kee Ma, drunken noodles. However, he incorrectly articulated the words as "dog shit". There were many laughs at Wayne's expense over this mistake.

*new government is formed. We will have 60 days after this occurs to move everything out of Laos.*

*October 1st our project pay is to be cut in half. I knew this was coming and in effect is the second pay cut, as the first was the reduction in flight hours. I expect all project pay to be eliminated eventually.*

*The work is easier in that no one shoots at you if you stay out of [enemy] territory. This is not always possible and they will whack away at you if they get the chance.*

*The rains have subsided and the cool season will start soon. It is the finest time of the year. Flying is good then as [the skies are] very clear..."*

Letter Home, 09/25/73.

With the S-58T Special Project program temporarily placed on hold pending negotiations in Vientiane, and with no overt enemy violations, I was scheduled upcountry for normal line pilot work at Long Tieng. I would spend six days in the field.

On the 16<sup>th</sup>, I boarded Twin Otter 74M, flown by Jim Pearson and Frank Renigar. An unscheduled maintenance event precluded us from flying far, and we were forced to return to Udorn. (Twenty minutes.)

During September, Jim would continue to be busy working out of Pakse, at PS-44, and in Cambodia conducting High Tail intelligence gathering missions from ground personnel for Cambodian T-28 pilot strikes. Jim and Olson repositioned 89EX to Pakse the night of the eighth. (One plus forty-two day and night, one-hour instrument.) The following day they conducted all day operations in Cambodia and recovered to Lima-11 at dark. (Eleven plus seventeen, one plus thirty instruments, one landing.) The operation continued on Monday the 10<sup>th</sup>. (Ten plus eighteen, one plus fifty instruments, one landing.) On the 11<sup>th</sup>,

after flying eleven plus fifty-eight, two plus thirty instruments, and two landings, the crew RTB Udorn. Pearson and Ted Mauldin returned to Pakse on the 27th in 89EX. During an ensuing mission, they encountered a rare bird strike. (One plus fifty-five day and night, one-hour instrument, two landings.) High Tail resumed the following day in earnest. After a very long day, they returned to Udorn. (Eleven plus fifty-three, one six night, three hours instruments, two landings.) <sup>15</sup>

I re-boarded 786 for Long Tieng, where I joined Chuck Frady and Deak Kennedy in Papa Hotel Echo. (One plus fifty-five.) I had not worked at The Alternate for some time, and even in the reduced hostility, more relaxed environment, it took a while before I relearned the location of new friendly positions, and felt comfortable working in the area. Frady, who had been working recently in the area, helped a great deal with my transition. (Six plus thirty, fifteen minutes night, forty landings.) Lacking the number of familiar American faces, Long Tieng was decidedly different, and somewhat impersonal. However, with local people like air operations honcho "Snoopy" assigning missions, operations proceeded without problems. Previously, Portacamp trailers and vacant Customer rooms had provided ample space for a few helicopter crews at night. Now, with the Air America hostel rebuilt, the majority of crews RON there.

After fog and low clouds in the valley cleared the following morning, exposing accessible gaps and ridgelines, we began work. Gary Gentz and Hal Augustine had replaced Kennedy the previous evening. Comparable to the Company-mandated pilot route checks, Augie was along to administer the periodic Flight

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<sup>15</sup> Jim Pearson September FEPA logbook entries for 09/06/73-09/11/73; 09/27, 28/73.





Lower elevations in portions of the surrounding hills often allowed us to exit and enter Long Tieng during periods when the bowl was covered by low clouds. The east gap can be seen looking over the lower portion of the paved Long Tieng runway. To the right is the approach-departure path, or what was called the south gap. The high mountains of Phou Khao (LS-14) are seen to the middle right. Not seen, there was also a west gap.

Author Collection.

Mechanic evaluation. <sup>16</sup> After this task was satisfied, he returned to Udorn. (Seven plus forty, forty landings.)

With the advent of reduced flight time, Udorn operations scheduled frequent crew changes to maintain somewhat equal pilot times. Toward the end of the month, this became an exercise in chaos. On Tuesday, Charlie Basham replaced Frady, and Gary Gentz was our sole Flight Mechanic. Taking advantage of improved weather, we worked nine plus twenty hours, including twenty minutes night time in the Long Tieng area. On the 19<sup>th</sup>, Chuck Low replaced Gentz. (Nine plus fifteen, twenty minutes night, forty landings.)

Marius Burke, who was still transitioning to the Twinpac, replaced Basham on Thursday. Marius conducted most of the landings, and my attempts to log IP time were later disallowed. (Seven plus fifteen, ten landings.) We flew almost a full day on the 21<sup>st</sup>, and RTB late (1920 hours) with Papa Hotel Echo. (Eight plus fifty, fifty minutes night, twenty landings.)

Following two days off the schedule, I was assigned several days of standby at home. Finally, on 30 September, I was scheduled to deadhead to The Alternate on CASI aircraft Papa Foxtrot Victor (PFV). (Fifty-nine minutes.) I took control of Echo with Chuck Frady and Deak Kennedy. After flying seven plus twenty hours, and twenty minutes night, and conducting forty landings, we repaired to the SKY hill to eat and RON. These post ceasefire RONs at The Alternate were quite boring. Except for an occasional libation, there were no movies or conversations with Raven pilots to pass time. It was difficult to fathom that the Long Tieng era was almost over.

My two-day stint upcountry extended to the first. After several hours supplying the front lines, we headed south for

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<sup>16</sup> Augie: Although few were aware of this, Augie was also my boyhood nickname. Aug has remained so to this day among close friends.

Udorn, as Echo was scheduled for routine maintenance. (Seven plus forty-five, forty landings.)



**W**hile I was off on the second, an unusual event took place in the Long Tieng area.

### **A CATES CONUNDRUM AND DESSERTION IN THE SPECIAL PROJECT**

Marking one of several helicopter crews routinely working the myriad of defensive positions around Long Tieng, Captain Al Cates, Charlie Basham, and Chuck Low were completing their fourth day flying Papa Hotel Delta. The first two days of the month involved supplying Lima Kilo (LK-TG8528-6,000 feet elevation), a forward defensive pad about eight miles north of Long Tieng and west-northwest of Lima Site-72.

Recovering late after a nine-hour, twenty landing day, the crew repaired to the Air America hostel for a quiet dinner and early sack-time. To relax, Al consumed half a beer. <sup>1</sup>

To accommodate crews, the Customer bar was still open on Sky hill above the honey bear cage. Senior pilot John Fonburg was one of the men drinking there that night. John had a snoot full of beer, when Zack departed the radio room and entered the bar looking for a pilot to conduct a medevac at the LK pad. <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The drinking rule had been relaxed years before at Long Tieng and created somewhat of a problem for a few individuals, who were not well disciplined. It came to a head after this incident.

<sup>2</sup> When upcountry operations involved special or extra hazardous missions, usually the senior pilot at a site set the trend for all pilots present, and others normally went along with the decision. Despite the Company's twelve-hour bottle to throttle no drinking rule, there were many good reasons for refusing night flights. With no horizon and a lack of night flying proficiency, they could be dangerous, particularly in the mountains. Too many unknown variables could foster irreversible problems. This was the case when the Bell crew of Charlie Weitz and Robbie Robertson crashed at Moug Soui during an evacuation attempt in February 1969.

John wisely refused, so Zack Jeoped up the parking ramp to the Air America hostel to seek a sober pilot who was willing to perform the job at first light. As he explained to those still in the dining room, a Thai soldier had injured his leg during a grenade incident.<sup>3</sup> Cates asked Zack if the wound was critical. Obtaining an affirmative, he indicated that it would be no problem to perform the extraction. Cut into the south side of the mountain, the large flat pad was secure and was easy to land on. He had been working the LK outpost all day and knew it well. As long as retrieval was not in the valley, it should not present any problems. Moreover, as a member of the S-58T Special Project program, and also checked out in the specially-equipped H-500P aircraft, Al had an abundance of night flying training, experience, and proficiency, and he was confident that he could perform the job safely. After retrieval, he could fly the man back to Udorn for medical help. Going home appealed to his crew, as they were tired from four days of upcountry work.

After Zack sanctioned the flight, Cates deferred to Lloyd Higgins, senior pilot at the hostel and also a member of the Special Project, asking him if it was alright to go. Lloyd indicated that it was no problem with him, and asked if Al wanted him to accompany him. Cates wanted Higgins, and his cockpit mate who drank a lot, to remain at Long Tieng in the unlikely event that something did happen.

A Thai doctor and two other men elected to accompany the flight, as they wanted a ride to Udorn. Al acquiesced, but as

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<sup>3</sup>It is not known if Customer pressure was applied, but a portion of Thai participation in the Lao war hinged on assurances by the Agency that they would always be supported when WIAs were involved. This was somewhat abrogated in regard to the 1971 loss of Ban Na. Wayne Knight Email. Wayne knew nothing regarding Customer pressure, but added this was the type of problem that had plagued pilots throughout the Lao conflict.

Delta would be fairly heavy with a full fuel load, he told them to wait at The Alternate until after the pickup.

The mission was professionally performed. Basham indicated that the projected flight was no problem for him. The machine was first inspected, and then systems thoroughly checked well, before departing the valley. The most difficult portion of the flight was takeoff from the dark environs of the Long Tieng bowl. Without lights or ground reference, they had to fly blind until achieving altitude, and were able to see the ridgelines. Achieving this, they headed over the familiar route toward Lima Kilo (LK).

Previously alerted regarding the medevac flight, at approximately 2200 hours, the large pad was well lighted, and displayed a wind sock. For positive identification, while conducting a low reconnaissance, Cates overflew the landing zone and made a 360-degree circling approach. The clearing action confirmed that there was no enemy action in the area.

Because of the lack of a horizon and visible fixed objects except for the landing zone, relative motion and depth perception were greatly impaired at night. Therefore, Cates slowed more than normal on short approach, and the aircraft began to settle. To counter this condition, he added power. Despite this action, the aircraft continued settling, and dropped out of the sky. What happened next was just like reducing one power section during training sessions. Since his attention had been fixed on the landing zone, he failed to recognize the problem soon enough. Despite attempting a wave off to the right, airspeed was not regained and he was committed to a controlled crash. <sup>4</sup> He landed in a level attitude in scrub

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<sup>4</sup> With speed in excess of translational lift (approximately fifteen knots) it was generally possible to fly a Twinpac on one power section.

brush and low trees about half a mile and 1,000 feet below the landing site. Breathing a sigh of relief, noting that no one was hurt, Cates erroneously believed that there was minimum damage to the helicopter.

Afterward Lloyd Higgins retrieved the injured man from the Lima Kilo pad, but not the crew of Papa Hotel Delta, as people onboard Delta did not want another aircraft to venture into the cluttered valley at night. The next morning, flying 12F, John Fonburg picked up the crew.

The first of two management generated XOXOs was brief:

*"Damaged reported as substantial.*

*Ground party at site reports possible engine failure. Unable to debrief flight crew at this time. Flight crew remaining overnight with aircraft. Site security reported as good..*

*Will send investigating and recovery team AM 3 October M. Burke CP/RW."*

The following day a second XOXO read in part.

*"Damage substantial: Tail rotor and gearbox separated, tail cone and pylon separated and heavily damaged (left at site), main gearbox case cracked and all rotor blades destroyed, landing gear heavily damaged with left gear separated, cockpit and cabin relatively undamaged except on bottom of fuselage.*

[The PIC account of the incident was the same as that described above.] *The First Officer was monitoring the radio altimeter and states they were approximately 500 feet AGL on the side of the slope at the time settling began. The pilot states he had reduced airspeed for landing and airspeed [actually groundspeed] could have been almost zero at the time settling began. The cause is suspected to be settling with power (vortex ring state). However, investigation will be carried out in the*

*usual manner.*" <sup>5</sup>

A great deal of acrimony and finger pointing resulted following the accident. People could not understand why any mentally competent pilot would willingly accept a night mission that was not according to Company SOP, was highly frowned upon, and generally avoided. For Twinpac pilots, this accident marked a second loss, one that left us with only three Twinpacs to conduct normal work--Charlie Weitz left Papa Hotel Charlie at Khang Kho after losing one power section--and Special Project missions. It would result in a loss of revenue, and probably more pilot dislocation. (Although recovered, Papa Hotel Delta was not rebuilt.)

Then more fuel was spilled on the fire when Lloyd Higgins accused Cates of drinking two martinis after dinner in the bar.<sup>6</sup> Apparently Lloyd was still upset that, for an unknown reason, and courtesy of Buddy Rogers, bypassing a defunct seniority system, Al had been allowed to join the Special Project without normal peer vetting, and this not long after entering the Twinpac program on 17 November 1972. Recriminations were even voiced from Scratch Kanach and Jim Rhyne. There might have been some jealousy involved in the accusations, because after I turned down the Stateside 500P project slot, bypassing old timers, Cates was selected. As a result of the accident and

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<sup>5</sup> If settling with power was the problem, then an incorrect emergency procedure was conducted. Adding power during this condition only tends to enhance loss of lift and settling. A correct procedure would have been to lower the nose, regain airspeed, and fly out of the condition.

<sup>6</sup> I only knew what Lloyd Higgins conveyed to me. Scratch, a person who was usually placid about everything, was down on Cates. I was a little miffed at losing an aircraft, but had nothing against Al as a person. However, I did wonder about his common sense charging out at night. It did not make sense for a responsible pilot to jeopardize an aircraft and crew, when waiting a few hours for first light could have made all the difference. Still, there were impetuous types in our organization who were always trying to make a name for themselves.

alleged drinking, Higgins was attempting to gain support to bilge Al out of the Special Project. <sup>7</sup>

Despite conflicting opinions among the rank and file, Al had some supporters. They were Wayne Knight, with whom he socialized, and Buddy Rogers, who had chosen him for the Special Project program without consulting others in the program. <sup>8</sup>

The incident was being portrayed that Cates had launched after imbibing, and crashed one of the few aircraft necessary for our livelihood. Although sore over the loss of a Twinpac, the story did not equate to anything sensible. The question arose, why would a pilot who had been drinking go flying at night and jeopardize his crew and passengers? The incident and circumstances fostered the only real and lasting dissent that ever arose in the Special Project. <sup>9</sup>

Cates was temporarily reduced to a First Officer status, pending an official investigation. Private interviews and inquiries were conducted in CJ Abadie's office. The only true formal hearings were conducted in the form of accident type enquiries, and these were very limited in attendance. Cates

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<sup>7</sup> Al Cates Email, Al maintains to this day there was a vendetta against him because Buddy Rogers asked him to join the Agency. Wayne Knight asserts knowing nothing about Al being in line for an Agency job.

<sup>8</sup> EW Knight Emails, 01/03/01, 01/05/01. This incident became a particularly messy affair. In regard to the claim that Cates consumed two martinis prior to the flight Wayne asserts that he got to know Al and his family socially during a Phuket STO. He observed that Al was a light drinker, so the martini claim seemed out of character to him. Author note: Within the helicopter rank and file, Knight was perceived to be a supporter and good buddy of Cates.

Marius Burke interview, Wayne Knight was Al Cates' buddy. He skated on the incident. There was bitterness. Also, Al tried to promote himself.

<sup>9</sup> When Rip Green and Larry Price were assigned to the Project without peer vetting there was some rumbling within our group. However, by that time we had basically lost control over many original tenets and general consensus opinion in the Project. FEPA's decline and loss of seniority weighed heavily in the Company and Agency selection process.

recalled at one investigation board that Scratch Kanach, who Al considered one of the finest helicopter pilots in Air America, testified that Al told him he had been drinking on the night in question.<sup>10</sup>

It was part of the record that Cates approached Higgins prior to launching saying that he thought Lloyd would be more valuable as a backup. According to Cates, Higgins later apologized to Al for causing him trouble. Cates later flew with Higgins once, but he was unusually quiet in the cockpit.

Cates asserted that S-58T program Chief, Bob Davis, Chinook and Twinpac manager Bill Hutchison, Vice President of Air America Northern Division Thailand CJ Abadie, and AB-1 Customer Buddy Rogers were judging him. He observed that Buddy was neutral, and Hutch was particularly nasty. Bob Davis indicated that he should not have been so slow so far out of the pad.<sup>11</sup>

Disregarding the common-sense element, it all boiled down to one question: did he or didn't he drink two martinis before flying. Since no one would officially substantiate Lloyd's claim, the accusation could not stand and Al was eventually

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<sup>10</sup> Knight Email, 01/05/01. Kanach was down on Cates. He intimated to Wayne that Al "sort of" admitted to him that he had been drinking. But Scratch refused to make any formal statement or sign anything to that effect. Wayne believed that Scratch took his stance as a declaration of loyalty to Lloyd.

<sup>11</sup> EW Knight Emails, 01/05/01, 01/06/01. Wayne does not recall Buddy Rogers or any outsider at the hearings. He claimed that Buddy did not get involved, but was an interested party. He was perplexed about the matter as Wayne was. At least, while the three were together, Al never talked to Ab or Wayne about a vendetta against him.

vindicated and returned to Captain status. <sup>12</sup> However, there was still the problem of Cates' return to the Special Project program.

One night Chief Helicopter FCF pilot, Tom Moher, was in his cups. Probably to eradicate guilt pangs, he informed Cates that there had been previous trouble with one of Delta's power sections: one engine had a tendency to remain at full power, while the other spooled down to idle. Moreover, Tom believed that Al was being "railroaded" and forced out of the Project. <sup>13</sup>

After hearing Moher's revelations, Al stomped into Abadie's office saying that if he was forced out of the Special Project, he would seek out the Air Force Judge Advocate General, obtain a lawyer and go to court if necessary. Abadie and Air America's Chief of Security, Ty Harding, backed off. The incident was dropped and Cates was reinstated in the Project. We continued to

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<sup>12</sup> EW Knight Email, 01/05/01. The whole issue was a great discomfort to Wayne, as he had good relations with both principals. But in time he came to believe that Lloyd was the villain. He believed two martinis and a night flight were totally out of character for Cates. And he knew Lloyd was the only vocal dissenter when Al was first introduced into the Special Project program. Wayne never learned what had caused Lloyd's dislike for Al--perhaps some incident in the H-34 program. Even during interviews regarding the drinking accusations, Lloyd would not reveal anything of substance.

<sup>13</sup> Fearing reprisals from management, Tom's wife Kathy wanted Tom to remain silent. Mike Jarina Email, Mike indicated that as far as he knew from second-hand talk, there was no engine failure. Mike believed that the incident was purely pilot judgement and experience. The principals were after Cates because he had conducted the mission after a senior pilot had turned it down. Therefore, he should not have gone, and thinks the Customer put pressure on him.



march. <sup>14</sup> <sup>15</sup>

### **THE LINE**

Using Papa Hotel Echo, I continued afternoon upgrade training with Val Broz (DOH 11/30/66) on the third. With Tom Neis crewing from below, we flew locally for two hours and thirty-five minutes that included ten landings. Broz's training continued on Friday. During two sessions, we flew four plus thirty and fifteen landings, and Val was judged ready for upcountry training. Since we only had three S-58Ts left in the inventory--Alpha, Bravo, and Echo--it did not make much sense to train additional pilots, although it may have been the Company's way of further reducing flight time to a minimum to avoid paying overtime.

The next day, on the sixth, when Echo was deemed airworthy, Broz, Bing Bengston, Deak Kennedy, and I crewed the Twinpac to Long Tieng for work assignments and to RON. During the little

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<sup>14</sup> Afterward, I was one of the few pilots who had no qualms flying with Cates during training at PS-44.

<sup>15</sup> Author Note: After conducting research for this segment, much of the account was based on long after-the-fact recall by Wayne Knight and Al Cates. Since considerable time had elapsed and memories tend to fade, cobbling together a fair and accurate account of the incident has been quite difficult. And there are still contradictions that have obviously skewed the facts..

The entire flap marked a first for our outfit, and left a bad taste in my mouth. I always believed in fairness, and was in opposition to cliques or kangaroo courts. In my mind, the Special Project was never the same after the incident, but it had been evolving into something different for several months. Lines were drawn, and the old spark to accomplish the job was gone. Also contributing to general depression was FEPA's failure as a viable pilot organization to judge such cases, the diminished war and loss of income, unknown future, and other reasons. Chuck Low would never say anything to me when queried about the incident, even several years later when we were working for Bell Helicopter International in Iran. Since Chuck had always been forthright with me when asked questions in the past, I thought this highly suspect.

time left after arrival, we supported static defense lines around the base. (Four plus forty, fifteen landings.)

Chuck Frady joined us on Sunday to work The Alternate area. (Seven plus fifty, ten minutes night, twenty-five landings.) Except for training requirements, I was surprised that we were still allowed two pilots in the cockpit. I would soon discover the reason.

After the bowl cleared late in the morning, we continued working the area. (Six hours, twenty-five landings.) Later in the day, rumors indicated that sappers were near Long Tieng, so we parked the aircraft on the ramp and deadheaded to T-08 on 5302F. (One plus eight.)

On the 10th I checked into operations at 0900 hours. Broz, Bill Long, and I ferried Papa Hotel Bravo north to Long Tieng. Apparently, if not only an illusion, the sappers were no longer a factor, for after moving refugees, soldiers, bullets, and rice, we resumed RON. (Seven hours, twenty-five landings.) Field work continued. (Eight plus forty, twenty-five landings.)

Mike Jarina deadheaded to The Alternate on 786 to relieve the former Bell PIC and join Flight Mechanic Willy Parker on Papa Foxtrot Gulf. (Seven plus twenty, seventy-nine landings.)

Because of a lack of operational Twinpacs, and too many pilots there was a scramble to equalize flight time. In keeping with this policy, Ben Densley replaced Val Broz as my second pilot. (Five plus forty-three, fifteen landings.) Jarina continued his normal high time effort. (Nine plus fifteen, 103 landings.)

On the thirteenth, my final day at Long Tieng during this period, Ben, Bill, and I worked for seven hours and twenty-four minutes and twenty landings. I was then relieved, and deadheaded home on 5302F. (One plus ten.)



Loading area at Long Tieng. Taking advantage of our air assets, local people and refugees were always going somewhere.  
Author Collection.

Jarina continued his outstanding work with Parker. (Nine plus fifty, ninety-three landings.) He remained upcountry for two more days before returning to Udorn, having flown sixteen hours and averaging seventy landings a day. <sup>16</sup>

### **ONE ARM**

During June of 1962, while still serving with the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU), sent to Thailand as a U.S. military show of force during the Nam Tha, Lao flap, I went to an evening kickboxing (Muang Thai) event at the Udorn City Park. Standing on perimeter of the crowd was a man who wore a black and white checkered cotton cloth (like a traditional Pah Kah Mah loincloth favored by male laborers in the tropical climate) around his left shoulder. <sup>17</sup> Obviously a popular individual, "one-arm" was hailed by many in the crowd. Little did I know at the time that I would interface by marriage with the same person in later years.

While I was upcountry on the 11<sup>th</sup>, Khun Yai's cousin, Nakon Musagablert, was violently murdered at his house. Early in the morning, Nakon had the hood of his automobile raised checking the radiator with his six-year-old son Nope watching. A hired assailant approached from behind him, promptly delivered an accurate pistol shot to his head, and then disappeared. Nakon's assassination became another mystery in a string of unsolved crimes in the community. <sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Mike Jarina interviews.

<sup>17</sup> Nakon Musagablert had lost an arm as a child; hence we privately called him "one arm."

<sup>18</sup> The Nisagonrungsee family appeared cursed, for Bung Orn's estranged husband Charlie Carlson was also murdered, and the killers were never apprehended. Sometimes, if the principal was unpopular, or political pressure was involved, criminal cases were overlooked by the police or pigeonholed as old business.

Nakon left a large family. Since they lived on a triangle of land between our house on the Nong Khai Highway and Benjarn Road, Tuie often visited his wife, Jit, a comely lady, who I considered a little unbalanced. As members of the same family, we attended the funeral at a local wat prior to the cremation.

Nakon had worked for the regional newspaper and covertly for CID, the Thai criminal investigation division. He was unabashedly something of a muckraker, who often wrote and published inflammatory articles, and had been previously assaulted by unknown persons.

It was assumed by many people that the scathing exposés Nakon had written regarding thievery of valuable teak trees in government forests had contributed to his untimely death. Indicating that corruption was rampant in the lumber industry, many of the province's important and influential people were implicated. Pointing fingers, the scandal extended to Chelern Pangporn, governor of Udorn Thani Province. Since no tangible proof ever surfaced, the governor was not indicted for any crime. However, because of the supposition and the stigma involved, he was relocated to another province, where he was later mysteriously murdered. In Thai fashion, it seemed that "what goes around comes around."

### **THE PATHET LAO COME TO TOWN**

While we were still working upcountry on the 12th, two AN-12s landed at Wattay Airport carrying the first contingent of soldiers from the 206 Public Security Battalion. They insisted that because Vientiane was saturated with foreign elements--Americans, Thais, Formosans, Filipinos and South Vietnamese--they required their own infantry battalion to ensure their security.





Spread out along the southern Mekong River bank, the town of Nong Khai lay thirty miles north of Udorn and across the river from Vientiane, Laos.

Author Collection.

Under signed agreements, the Vientiane government was obliged to supply quarters, vehicles, communication and rations for the units. With Souvanna Phouma assenting, support materiel was also delivered without inspection. As additional agreements were signed, within two months additional communist troops were introduced to Vientiane and Luang Prabang. <sup>19</sup>

Following the February ceasefire agreement, senior USAID worker Mac Thompson, who was in charge of refugee air operations, continued to supply upcountry needs. As the situation progressed and the Air America C-46 cargo aircraft departed, there were still four CSAI C-46s and two Royal Lao Air (RAL) aircraft to perform the air drops (PBV, PBW). The drop program did decrease markedly by 1974, as AID was able to start shipping heavy tonnage to the LS-272 valley and on up to LS-20A via trucks.

Thompson observed no local reaction to the Pathet Lao soldiers in Vientiane. He kept sipping his favorite beer and visiting the dens around town. Ambassador Whitehouse issued a directive that Americans with guns should deliver them to the embassy security people for destruction. Seeing no logic in the mandate, Mac, who had two AK-47s, two SKSs, an M-1 Garand, a sawed-off M-2 carbine, and a sawed-off double barrel twelve-gauge shotgun, kept his arsenal.

One day a thief entered his house while he was at work. A radio was stolen. Mac reported the intrusion to the U.S. Embassy Security Police, who in turn, notified the local police. When half the police force arrived at the house wearing floppy hats, Thompson realized that he had forgotten that the police now consisted of mixed communist and government types.

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<sup>19</sup> Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 409.  
Sananikone, Soutchay, *CHECO*.

The men wanted to inspect the house for other possible missing items, so Mac was obliged to let them look. He accompanied the rightist policeman to his bedroom where his weapons were stored in the closet. He opened the closet door, quickly closed it, and shouted to no one, "Nothing missing here." <sup>20</sup>

### **SERIOUS UNREST IN BANGKOK**

Sometimes, without being aware, American politicians have a proclivity for meddling with and changing backward, undeveloped societies, often not for the better. Wars accelerate and best accomplish this.

During the early sixties, except for the more cosmopolitan Bangkok, much of Thailand was still rural and agricultural, with many people living at or just above subsistence levels. Few families enjoyed "creature comforts," modern conveniences, or the advanced technologies becoming prevalent in the Western world.

The Second Indochina War necessarily changed all that. Requiring bases for aircraft, logistics sites to store and funnel military goods across the border into Laos, and hard surface roads to move items quickly about the country, American money and machines poured into Thailand, and wise individuals fleet afoot were quick to take advantage of this opportunity. As

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<sup>20</sup> Mac Thompson Email, 05/24/98.

Thompson was in Luang Prabang for a couple of days visiting an Air Force friend, who was in Laos "in the black." Another friend was getting married there. They were all sitting on Round House Bar stools in front of the Phu Si Bungalow drinking beer, when General Ouane arrived with several of his officers. Ouane remembered Mac. They talked awhile and stayed until early morning. When it was time to leave, the general turned to one of his officers and said, "pay the bill." This shocked Mac, who thought, "Is this the commanding officer of the Lao military not just walking away and not paying the bill?" Times had definitely changed.



a result, people in power (mostly privileged military and police types) became enormously wealthy, and even more corrupt than before. Naturally, they did not wish to relinquish this benefit to anyone outside their cliques.

Marshall Sarit Thanarat and his army associates replaced the Phao-Phin police faction in 1957. Sarit became Prime Minister of Thailand, and, as an avowed anti-communist supported by U.S. advice and funding, ruled with an iron hand and martial law. Helping Sarit in this endeavor were army Generals Thanom Kittikachorn, who became Prime Minister after Sarit's death in November 1963, and Praphat Charusathien.

From 1963 to 1973, Thai government political power was divided among Prime Minister Thanom, his minister of interior, army commander General Praphat (Praphas), and Colonel Narong Kittikachorn, Thanom's son and Praphat's son-in-law, who was not well regarded inside or outside the military as a choice for Thanom's successor.

At first, Thanom continued Sarit's form of government. However, over time, economic development, more educational opportunities, especially access to the computer age, a burgeoning middleclass, and a thirst for the type of democracy displayed in the west, rank and file people demanded more say in their lives, and access to government. Toward the late 1960s and early 1970s, this quest for more political freedom led to constitutional and parliamentary changes to appease the evolving society.

Change of the old ways was no more desired than in the halls of the universities, where students were more politically astute than the man on the street. Political repression was intolerable, something that had to be eradicated.

During December 1972, Thanom announced a new interim constitution, replacing the one-year arrangement formed in 1971.

This one provided for a totally appointed legislative assembly, two-thirds of which would be selected from the ranks of the military and police that would perpetuate the Thanom regime.<sup>21</sup> This action provoked widespread discontent and protest, particular among college students.

The seeds of revolution continued to germinate. Unrest continued, and by May and June of 1973, students and workers rallied in the streets of Bangkok demanding a more democratic constitution and valid and reliable parliamentary elections. October events brought everything to a head.

*"The news from Thailand is not so good with all the riots, etc. Your Field Marshall Thanom Kittikachorn has been given the gate and is flying with his family to Boston where they will live."*

Letter from Home, 10/17/73.

Our letters crossed as usual.

*"You have probably been reading about the trouble in Bangkok. We are going down there tonight on the train and will be able to find out some of the more sordid details. I guess several hundred died and who knows how many were injured. I wonder who was behind it all? I think this country is doomed. I saw some students parading here in front of the house yesterday. I think they were asking for money to help those injured in the Bangkok fracas. I've a hunch that this is not the last of the problem [this was a prophetic statement]."*

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<sup>21</sup> Following the change of an absolute to a constitutional monarchy, the Thai constitution provided for an elected British type of parliament. This was generally followed, but there was still a lot of room for rigged elections.

*Tuie works a couple days a week for the Red Cross at the U.S. Air Force hospital and is now teaching Thai to Air Force personnel. [Previously] she taught a bit at the Thai Teachers College, but has discontinued this.* <sup>22</sup>

*We are still here and that is all I can say. The new government in Laos still has not been formed and I have heard December is a new target date. Who knows? We are not obligated to leave Laos until this occurs and then have sixty days to tie up loose ends. After that?*

Letter Home, 10/18/73.

*"The U.S. [eventually] had to make an adjustment to the realities of the world, but it was not easy for the Thai to*

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<sup>22</sup> My son Peter recalls his mother taking him to the USAF hospital after a Halloween party at the Cash residence. He was dressed in Ricky's hand-me-down Superman costume and won a rubber grasshopper prize for his age class. Wearing her cute blue and white striped uniform, Tuie had been working for the Red Cross since March 1973. Apparently, there was a flap upcountry, with Thai wounded arriving from the field. Rick and Pete were jumping up and down on a couch looking through a window at Air America Chinooks landing on the landing pads and WIAs being offloaded. Tuie and others were rushing them into the hospital on rolling type gurneys. To the little tyke, the wounds looked severe.

Tuie began teaching Air Force wives whose husbands were stationed in Udorn. They were not sponsored by USG and were in Udorn on their own. The women paid a fee for the instruction.

While working for the Red Cross, she met a lot of people. One was her cousin Orn's boyfriend Eddie--they later married. Ed got her involved in the Maryland University educational extension program teaching rudimentary Thai to U.S. Air Force types. By chance, Buddy Roger's wife Paula wanted to learn Thai in Tuie's class. However, this was not allowed under the rules. Eddie left it up to Tuie as to whether she would wave the rule and make an exception for Paula. She did. Paula was so pleased to be accepted that she told her husband about Tuie. To show appreciation, they invited Tuie to lunch at the officers' club, at which time, Tuie told them that her husband worked for Air America. Buddy said he knew me very well, without indicating that I worked for him. Unless the two were checking to see if I had divulged anything to Tuie about the Special Project, it was quite a coincidence. (I was always suspicious of Agency personnel motives.) Paula liked Tuie a lot and except when duties at the hospital prevented, invited her to lunch several times.

*adjust. Accordingly, the Thai did not have as much bargaining power as the U.S. The winding down of the Vietnam War from the Nixon Doctrine to the Peace Accord was a matter of too-little-too-late. These were lost years for Thailand in terms of adjustment, although some Thai leaders did advocate more adjustment, citing various incidents for convenient excuses, the Thai military leaders, in the main, clung to the U.S. as the dominant power in the region. This was due to the trust that the Thai military [accorded] to the U.S. administration as well as the U.S. expansion in South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.*

*There were many obvious signals [for] the U.S. to make new adjustments. The Nixon doctrine, which emphasized military disengagement [from South Vietnam], the joint Thai/U.S. defense plan for Thailand, and détente, which the U.S. [conducted] in secret, and a rapprochement with China without prior consultation with Thai leaders or any other country's leaders.*

*The Thai military leaders had seen the handwriting on the wall; they needed a conservative government, [therefore], Thanom began to adjust [his policy] to accommodate communist China." <sup>23</sup>*

Even before President Nixon's successful visit to China, during 1971 Thanom and other military and political leaders staged a coup against their own cabinet, constitution, and parliament. For the U.S., the war was winding down, and President Nixon was withdrawing troops from the Southeast Asian Theater, so Thanom wanted to perpetuate and assure continued military rule. The Thai constitution was abolished, and a National Executive Council established for a year. The council ruled for a year, when a provisional constitution was instituted, and Thanom became Prime Minister again.

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<sup>23</sup> Mounghkariby, Wilat and Warren, William, *A Century and a Half of Thai/American Relations*, 1982, (the Thai view). The Author discovered this information in the Thammasat University library in Bangkok.

Thailand was in transition. Popular dissent against the Thanom regime's oligarch and corrupt rule, and mounting pressure from the press and public, led to general unrest and a student uprising. Moreover, abandonment of American policy and total military commitment undermined the Thai military regime's credibility.

Wars tend to foster changes in society. Some are quite radical. During World War Two, American women left the home and entered the workforce in droves for the first time in American history. They never looked back. Men went to college on the GI Bill, and a strong, new American middle class was born.

The Second Indochina War and its derivatives had sparked dissention and radical protests among young people not only in the U.S., but in western countries around the world. Although there was some violence, it did not reach the proportions that it did in Thailand.

Not content with just studying, universally, university students are restless souls and seek outlets to relieve stress.<sup>24</sup> This was so in Thailand. As the country sought increased democracy and change in their systems, a federation of student unions (the National Student Center of Thailand) evolved into more political and militant entities.

On 6 October, the arrest of eleven students (one more was arrested the following day) for distributing anti-government pamphlets throughout the city agitating for drafting a new constitution, resulted in a student uprising and serious consequences for the normally quiet kingdom. Bail was denied the youths when Deputy Prime Minister Praphas Charusathien

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<sup>24</sup> While at Duke University, I can recall a panty raid at the Hanes House nurses' quarters, destruction of leaded glass windows with snowballs in the winter, and other stress relieving activities at Duke University during the 1950s.

erroneously asserted that those arrested were involved in a communist plot to overthrow the government. <sup>25</sup>

The constitution was not the sole reason for student disquiet, only the catalyst. Many students were also frustrated because professional, well-paying jobs were limited, and difficult to obtain because of the vastly increased numbers of matriculating and college graduates during the 1960s and early 1970s.

As anti-government rallies formed to protest the arrests, pressure increased on the government, and demonstrations blossomed as students demanded an end to the military dictatorship. Some of the demonstrations continued non-stop for several days. Student agitators were careful in their measures against the military dictatorship. In order to garner support from the general public, marchers touted respect for religion, monarchy, and nationalism.

Protests reached a crescendo on the 13<sup>th</sup>, when between 250,000 to 400,000 people (the most in history) marched through the streets, and gathered at the Democratic Memorial in the center of Bangkok to demand release of their brothers. In order to reduce the boiling point and forestall serious consequences, the government agreed to their demands, and promised that a permanent constitution would be installed within a year.

During this period, factors unknown to most people were developing. Many Thai Unity volunteers who had recently returned from Laos were still loyal to Lieutenant General Vitoon Yasawasdi (THEP, former commander of Headquarters 333), who was now Assistant Director General of the Thai police. When a few veterans were observed in Bangkok, rumors began to spread that

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<sup>25</sup> Van der Kroef, *Communism in Southeast Asia*. Government statements to the press reported that communist documents had been found in the detainees homes.

his former troops were preparing to move on the city. This generated sufficient concern in Udorn that prompted miniguns installed on the Huey White Horse gunship fleet to be disabled.

Late on the morning of 14 October, after some violence and vandalism occurred, tanks, helicopters, and infantry troops were introduced to supplement police units. Rifle and machinegun fire rained down on demonstrators; seventy-seven were killed and the number of wounded far exceeded 800.<sup>26</sup> The military occupied Thammasat University, and anarchy in parts of the city ruled for a time. As a result of the carnage, local popular support for the youthful students increased.

Also sympathetic to the students, King Bhumibol assumed a direct role in dealing with the crisis. He allowed student first-aid stations to function on royal property. Then he summoned Thanom and his cabinet to Chitralada Palace in the hopes of resolving the issue without further bloodshed. As the soldiers withdrew from the battlefield, in the early evening the King spoke on both television and radio, announcing a compromise solution to the problem. Thanom resigned as Prime Minister, but temporarily remained as supreme commander of the armed forces. After consulting with student leaders, by royal decree the King appointed former Supreme Court Judge, Sanya Dhamasakti, interim Prime Minister, with instructions to draft a new constitution.

Naturally, the dicey situation and unknown fostered concern within Bangkok Air America management. The Assistant Vice President in Bangkok issued an XOXO on the 15th stating:

*"Bangkok situation serious and confusing. Many deaths reported. Very strong feeling and violent actions taking place at this time. Many rumors. So far, no anti-foreign outbursts.*

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<sup>26</sup> According to newspaper articles of the day, Colonel Narong reputedly machine-gunned demonstrators from the rear ramp of a Chinook helicopter.

*All commercial firms and Thai government organizations have been ordered closed for the next three days-October 15, 16, and 17.*

*No known death of Company employee at this time.*

*Eye am closing down Dusit Thani office. Airport operations normal so far.*

*Strongly advise no one come to Bangkok until situation calms down and stability restored. Will advise."*

CJ Abadie issued his own XOXO regarding the local conditions:

*"Situation calm around Udorn. However, local teacher's college expects some student disturbance this week as a follow-up to last week's student disturbance in Khon Kaen. Believe these are not tied closely to the theme of the Bangkok situation, but appear to be more the subject of school administration and education politics in general.*

*The air base security is normal with no special alerts or curfews. Air America security guards have been alerted as a precaution only."* <sup>27</sup>

Overruling student militants, who lobbied to prosecute the three government leaders, in the typical-right, wrong, and the Thai way, on the 15th, in the wake of some violence continuing from those inflamed by the slaughter of their countrymen, the King allowed Thanom, Praphat, and Narong to secretly depart the country, but this was not announced to the public until they were gone.

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<sup>27</sup> EW Knight Emails, 01/05/01, 01/06/01.

*"As things turned out, we read more into the unrest than we should have. We made emergency preparations for evacuation and attempted to keep the number of employees having to transit in and out of the base to a minimum. Detailed plans were held by AB-1. So far as he knew if things turned sour. They were to contact AB-1 for guidance". Wayne definitely thought the Bangkok problem would pour over into Udorn and he was glad he was wrong.*



At least for a period, the students had won the day. With principals no longer present, military rule ended for a time. In the immediate aftermath of the uprising, a perception of promise pervaded the kingdom.

As an article in the Bangkok Post reported years later:

*"The 14 October uprising reduced the power of the armed forces and the civil service system and changed the character of the Thai society. Class and status were undermined and equality became more respected. It started channeling the ideological culture of youth into social and cultural capital which brought about important changes in Thailand. It liberated both the business sector and the poor villagers from the rule of dictators and the civil service..."* <sup>28</sup>

***"It is all quiet in Thailand at present..."***

Letter Home, 10/25/73.

## **JARINA**

On Wednesday the 17th, Jarina conducted a three plus thirteen-hour VIP day flight in 13F to PK 21 Military Reservation (LS-364). The next day he flew Papa Foxtrot Gulf one plus thirty-one and two landings.

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<sup>28</sup> Segment Sources:

Internet: *Thailand in Transition*.

*World Book*.

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*.

Phuangkasem, Thai Foreign Relations.

Sayad Kurdpol, *Counterinsurgency*.

*Bangkok Post*, 10/14/98.

Internet, Wikipedia, *1973 Thai Popular Uprising*.

Internet, Andy Box.com, *The Student Revolution*.

Asian Focus Group, *Thailand, The Strong Man Era*.

Van der Kroef, *Communism in Southeast Asia*.

Author Note: To a greater extent, I witnessed the same thing occur in Iran during the late 1970s. Young people, or students, led the revolution.

Trash missions continued on the 19<sup>th</sup>, when Mike and Bobby Barrow flew General Trefry to Vientiane in the morning, and then back to T-08 when his meetings at the U.S. Embassy were completed. (One plus twenty-five.)

Jarina, Jim Sweeny (DOH 09/30/70) and Gary Gentz crewed 13F upcountry on Friday. <sup>29</sup> Jarina conducted seventy-three landings at Ban Nam Song (LS-363) before terminating at Long Tieng for the night. Crews and ships continued to rotate. On Sunday, Mike joined the Thai crew of Pratan and Latloi in Papa Foxtrot Hotel. They conducted refugee work out of Moung Cha (LS-113) before returning to Udorn. (Seven plus ten, fifty-seven landings.)

On the 24<sup>th</sup>, Mike conducted two VIP flights to Wattay Airport with PFH. (Two plus thirty-seven, five landings.) Five days later Mike, Morris, and Phil Velasquez ferried 13F to Long Tieng. They spent the day working at Padong and Pha Phai (LS-65), and RON at The Alternate. (Eight plus forty-five, sixty-three landings.) They continued work at the same sites on Wednesday. Flights to LS-360, LS-307 (Ban Nam Yon Nea) and Ban Pha Ke (LS-353) were included in the day's assignments. (Nine plus fifteen, sixty-eight landings.) On the final day of the month, Boonleun replaced Morris. The crew worked at Padong and Pha Phai, and returned 13F to Udorn in the early afternoon.

After four days resting and attending to things in Bangkok, we returned to our home. I had developed a cold, and, after an instrument link training session, asked for one sick day. <sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Years later, exercising several USG agencies' drug policy, Jim Sweeney was shot down and killed during a Huey night flight in Peru along with former Air America pilot PIC Bob Hitchman, while interdicting drug cartel coco fields. Air America helicopter pilot Dan Carson also died in Peru during a night test flight.

<sup>30</sup> When equipment was moved out of Vientiane, we inherited the link trainer machines.

## **CHEATING**

The communist hierarchy had always acted in its own best interest to achieve military and political agendas. The decision in 1959 to unite the two Vietnams under one communist system (and eventual hegemony over all Indochina) had not changed. Regardless of the time involved to achieve the goal, since 1959 it had been, and still was, the overriding strategy; a ceasefire was only a means to an end. Now with the Americans apparently out of the picture because of political pressure, and not likely to reengage in Southeast Asia, it seemed an appropriate time for the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) war machine to continue preparing for an end game against the forces of South Vietnam.

A compendium of intelligence reports since the Paris ceasefire agreement indicated that North Vietnamese Army presence and assets in South Vietnam had increased to 70,000 men, 400 tanks, 200 artillery pieces, fifteen AAA guns and twelve airfields. Moreover, reconnaissance revealed that an all-weather road from the North to Tay Ninh was nearly complete.

As the North Vietnamese moved additional resources into the South, President Nixon vetoed the War Powers Act that would limit presidential power to commit armed forces abroad without Congressional approval. The president would have to report to Congress within forty-eight hours, and limit to sixty days the amount of time an armed force could remain in place without Congressional approval. Upset with Congressional restrictions, Nixon claimed the bill imposed unconstitutional and dangerous limitations on presidential authority to act during times of conflict, but, happy that U.S. participation in the war was over, catering to the people, politicians did not care. Congress overrode the veto on 7 November. <sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> John Bowman, *Vietnam Almanac*.

## **TWIN OTTER MISSIONS**

At least for the moment, Agency operations were not similarly affected by restrictive Congressional mandates. With no Congressional shackles imposed like those inhibiting U.S. military operations, more emphasis was accorded to the importance of our Special Project work gathering intelligence on enemy movements in various parts of Indochina. Intelligence was critical for counter measures, or to world disclosure. However, without proper input from road watch teams, spies, electronic devices, and Special Project efforts, the Nixon Administration was generally blinded as to future enemy plans in South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

Captain Jim Pearson's work continued in southern Laos and Cambodia. On 1 October, flying 89EX, Pearson and Olson prepositioned to Pakse to participate in another High Tail intelligence mission. When weather prevented launching on Tuesday, the mission proceeded on the 3rd. After orbiting for hours, and with onboard personnel processing incoming messages and enemy intercepts, the crew RTB Udorn. (Eleven plus fifty-six, one-hour night, two plus forty instrument, two landings.)

Pearson and Connelly were back at Pakse on the sixth to conduct another High Tail mission. After a night at the Air America hostel, they performed the mission and recovered at the Udorn facility. (Twelve plus eleven, one nineteen night, three plus forty-five instrument, two landings.)

High Tail missions continued on the 10th and 11<sup>th</sup>. (One plus thirty-six, one plus seven night, one ten instrument; eleven plus fifty-six, forty-five minutes night, two ten instrument, two landings.) Recoveries were made at Udorn.

Bob Watson, a new Otter Special Project pilot, began training on the 13th in 868. Training with Pearson continued the following day. A supervised line flight (what we would call a

route check in the helicopter program) took place on the 18th, repositioning 9EX to Pakse for a High Tail mission. (One plus forty-three, forty-four minutes night, one landing.) The mission took place the next day, after which the crew recovered at T-08. (Eleven plus twenty-five, twenty-eight minutes night, three plus ten instrument flight.)

High Tail operations continued, and the crew returned to Pakse on Sunday the 21<sup>st</sup>. (One plus forty-five, one eight night, one landing). The actual mission took place the next day. After completing the assignment, the Otter flew back to Udorn. (Twelve hours, fifth-six minutes night, two landings.)<sup>32</sup>

The following day Pearson delivered helicopter crews and Customers to PS-44 in order to commence helicopter training for another antenna relay (ADR) mission in Sam Neua Province. Jim and Bob shuttled supplies from Pakse to the mountain training base to sustain the increased number of people there. After accomplishing this task, Pearson returned 74M to Udorn. (Four plus two, five landings.)

### **POLITICAL ACTION PROGRAM IN LAOS**

In Washington, the National Security Council, prodded in October by State, Defense, JCS, and CIA 40 committee, conducted a meeting to discuss Lao issues on 13 November.

*"For 11 years CIA supported irregular forces have been fighting in Laos. Now the scene is shifting to a peace-time*

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<sup>32</sup> Jim Pearson log entries for 10/01, 03/73; 10/06-07/73; 10/10-11/73; 10/14/73; 10/18-19/73; 10/21-22/73; 10/23/73. Pearson's 22 October High Tail mission in and around Cambodia marked the end of Jim Pearson's participation in such operations. By the end of 1973, with the signing of the Military Procurement Authorization Act of 1973, the U.S. Congress terminated all State and Department of Defense funding for both covert and overt military support to governments at war in Indochina. Although this act was probably considered and accelerated operations, CIA was not similarly affected to any extent.

*situation, demobilized troops will be looking for jobs and leaders must compete in elections. The non-communist leaders with whom we have worked need financial assistance to strengthen and expand their political base.*

*CIA proposes to spend a [sum] this fiscal year helping selected political leaders. As directed political action [funds] would be used to support political activities designed to promote a unified non-communist state with popular support in the next national election. Socio-economic programs would use the [money] in developing cooperatives, aid to veterans, and educational efforts to create economic viability as a base for political leadership and strength. In addition to its intrinsic worth, the program will provide opportunities for the U.S to influence Laotian political leaders covertly. Funds are available in the Agency budget.* <sup>33</sup>

Corresponding with the demand for intelligence, we were challenged to maintain our three Twinpacs, and also conduct Company-mandated pilot checks.

Reflecting concern for continuing S-58T engine problems, and intent on gathering research information for Pratt and Whitney, the Washington Engineering Department, and Bob Davis' Udorn department, Bill Hutchison, Assistant Chief Pilot, Heavy Helicopters Northeast Thailand Division, issued a Memorandum on the 21st.

*"Experiments have been successfully conducted to determine if engine coastdown can be feasibly checked on S-58T and CH-47's...All Rotary Wing turbine engine coastdowns on these aircraft*

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<sup>33</sup> FRUS #114, 10/13/73, Memorandum from Rob Roy Ratliff of the National Security Council Staff to Secretary of State Kissinger, Political Action Program in Laos. Recommendation for approval of the plan went forward and was approved by Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security, Brent Scowcroft, on 19 November.

*will be taken from NG/N1 45 percent to 5 percent daily and recorded in the logbook.*

*S-58T procedure: After engine cool down, one power section will be shut down, and the NG [gas producer] coastdown taken. After the coastdown is completed and the clock reset, the same procedure will be repeated with the other power section."*

*Additional policy was mandated "in the interest of weight saving, better utilization of aircraft and prevention of unnecessary power application.*

*One S-58T aux tank will be positioned at LS-20A permanently...The remaining tanks will be kept at Udorn for use when required..*

*Until further notice window armor can be used or removed at pilot's discretion."*

Using Papa Hotel Alpha, Hutch, as he was commonly called in our group, and I conducted my proficiency check on the afternoon of the 30th. Although we had flown together several times at PS-44, it was the first time that I had flown with Hutch, while he was in charge. During a two plus thirty-five-hour period and twenty-five landings, I demonstrated and accomplished all flight and emergency maneuvers that I taught others. Thinking the session was over, I was air taxiing slowly along the parallel taxiway to the Air America ramp, when Hutch suddenly reduced both throttle grips to idle. Believing such a condition highly unlikely, I had never taught this to trainees, and was completely surprised by his action. It was no real problem, for already at a low altitude the aircraft settled to the concrete with little need for cushioning. I looked across the cockpit at Hutch, who was exhibiting a gotcha grin. We both had a good laugh over the power sections chop. I was not finished flying that day.

**PHOU NIA MISSION IN UPPER MR-2**

While I was off the schedule recuperating from a cold, since the 23rd Scratch, Dan Zube, Gary Gentz, and Bill Long had been staying at PS-44 conducting night NVG, ADR, and LORAN refresher training, and preparing for another ADR mission in Sam Neua. Because of Kennedy and Low's failure with previous ADR placement, Rogers, who was a champion of cross training, opted to commit fresh primary crews.

During a meeting at the White House toward the end of the month, I learned from Buddy Rogers that Jim Pearson and other Otter crews had ascertained that the phone tap on Route-65 had not been discovered, and it was still functioning. This justified installing another solar array antenna to boost signals from the phone tap and relay them south. Planners assumed that sufficient time had elapsed since the original relay had been discovered and spirited away. Now another antenna placement in the only line of sight tree in Laos overlooking the tap on Route-65 seemed feasible. With the ceasefire in effect, and military air interdiction in the region no longer an issue for the locals, it was believed the enemy had been lulled into a sense of complacency that would enhance the success of another ADR mission.

President Ronald Regan would later espouse as his watchword when dealing with communist leaders, "*trust but verify.*" With pressure from CIA Headquarters Langley, Virginia, and to remain ahead of political timelines, and provide current intelligence from upper Military Region Two, a green light to proceed with the ADR deployment was flashed to Rogers' office. Plans were dusted off and reviewed to continue our work in Sam Neua Province. Current reconnaissance photographs were encouraging, and since bombing had ceased, and larger Vietnamese units had



withdrawn north across the border, the area was deemed fairly quiet.

The ADR mission was scheduled for the last day of the month, and since I had not recently trained very much and was designated the number two cover ship, Tom Grady, Flight Mechanic Tom Neis, and I conducted refresher night training on the 30th in Papa Hotel Alpha. It was an excellent idea, for our unique and exacting type of night flying failed to guarantee success if performed without practice. The work required special proficiency techniques with equipment that normal operations did not include. Stressing cockpit coordination, LORAN navigation, and NVG familiarity, we flew Papa Hotel Alpha over a canned route south of Udorn to an isolated mountain pinnacle in the vicinity of Khon Kaen, where I landed at night using the goggles. A return flight was made to the extensive Phu Phan Mountain range, where Scratch and I had worked landing zones the previous year preceding the log mission. Training proceeded well, and we recovered to our parking ramp slot well before midnight. (Three plus twenty night.)

Mission crews checked into operations the next day at 1330 hours, and we pilots were bussed to Buddy's office for a final briefing. Except for obtaining radio frequencies and a figurative confidence building feel-good pat-pat on our sixes, there was nothing much new that had not already been covered during previous meetings. Area situation and photo analysis generally remained the same.

In order to maintain maximum surprise, the mission was scheduled for the early morning hours, when most normal human beings were believed sleeping--there was no longer the need to farm, repair the roads, or patrol during the night. Flying late at night and early morning would make the job more difficult from a Circadian Rhythmic prospective, but would greatly enhance

the prospect of success. (Night flying before a mission helped, but did not really modify the human wake-sleep cycle.) Otter pilots Jim Pearson and Don Romes would support us in 74M with weather coverage. Following a successful ADR insertion, onboard Customer technicians, using a special oscilloscope and a number count (five being the optimal), were prepared to align the antenna to the phone tap for maximum reception.

After completing standard logistic tasks, we taxied to the Customer's Q warehouse, where helpers and Scratch's Flight Mechanic crew in Hotel Bravo fastened the ADR to the side of the fuselage. Papa Hotel Alpha was equipped with assorted weaponry should we need to conduct a crew recovery under hostile conditions.

We stopped at Long Tieng to top off auxiliary fuel tanks and wait for the launch time that would take us to the Bouam Long staging site. Because SKY hill was pounded with artillery during the battle for Skyline Ridge and Long Tieng, it was considered too exposed for normal operations. Therefore, a reinforced concrete operations bunker had been erected halfway down the valley close to Skyline Ridge, where nothing but indirect fire might impact. The dark tomb appeared busy inside, and there were several people present that I did not know.

When the agreed time for launch arrived, we took off from The Alternate on the western route we had used for years to avoid Plain of Jars hazards and known enemy positions. It was after 1800 hours and quite dark when we taxied to the designated aircraft fueling and parking area on the east side of the Site-32 bowl. The Otter crew was en route from Udorn to assess meteorological conditions in the target area. After a considerable period, Pearson landed at Bouam Long with his findings and latest weather analysis.

Shortly before midnight, Jim departed and headed toward Route-65 to be in place and inform us of any significant changes in weather or late-night vehicle traffic. Heading east, we followed Scratch at a respectable distance until making a direction change to the north toward Phu Nia. We had been over the identical route many times before, but it was always challenging work because of harsh terrain and the presence of unfriendly villagers or soldiers below who thought nothing of blasting at the sound of our blacked-out machines, sometimes with heavy weapons. Marking a distinct curse of aviators, bad things often occurred at night. To the more superstitious, perhaps it was the proverbial bad phis (spirits) lurking in the dark air.

As we closed on our objective, Alpha commenced a rapid series of compressor stalls. Boom. Boom. Boom. The blasts and accompanying power loss were disconcerting. Normally, boomers were restricted only to periods of high-power demand during take offs and landings, not steady cruise power settings. Exercising the established emergency procedure for compressor stalls, after identifying the culprit power section, I reduced the collective lever, rolled the offending power section throttle to flight idle, switched to manual fuel control mode, and slowly rolled the throttle clockwise to marry the tachometer N1 needle to the properly functioning power section, and restored twin engine power. Constant monitoring of the tachometer and throttle jockeying was required, for even a slight five percent split in the observed needles would result in the manual fuel control section spooling down to idle. This was no problem if airborne in cruise configuration and power could be reestablished.

With power restoration accomplished, breaking radio silence, I informed Scratch of our problem, and that I was returning to Site-32 to investigate the stalling condition.

According to our Special Project SOPs, if one segment of the operation aborted, all would be obliged to follow. Having experienced a spooling down of an engine section at night with Dan Zube in March, and the loss of one power section due to inattention during final at Bouam Long, this time I maintained extra diligence while landing.

After securing the helicopter, using flashlights, the three Flight Mechanics removed stainless steel panels and tore into the affected engine section, attempting to determine a solution for the stalls. Regardless of their efforts, stalls continued during subsequent ground run ups. Since I did not relish continuing a mission with one engine in automatic and another in manual fuel mode, we passed the information to Udorn that Scratch and I, with AB-1 concurrence, collectively agreed to scrub the mission and remain at Bouam Long until daylight. (Five plus fifteen, two plus forty night, two landings.)

Pearson landed and after a short parley agreed to RTB with information the Flight Mechanics provided for the maintenance and operations departments that we would return in the morning. (Six plus fifty-three, six plus eleven night, three plus ten instrument, two landings.)

At daylight, after another investigation, but failing to determine a probable reason for the stalls, we departed Bouam Long for Udorn, with one power section in automatic and the other in manual fuel control mode. Although a bit fatiguing from constant monitoring of the tachometer and throttle manipulations to keep the N1 needles married, the two plus twenty-five-hour daylight trip was uneventful. <sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Wayne Knight Email, Wayne facetiously believed that I was the record holder for compressor stalls.

**HITCHMAN**

Bob Hitchman's checkered career with Air America continued. Hitch was essentially a fine pilot, but as a restless and aggressive type, he was always pushing the envelope in order to ingratiate himself with management, while harboring the intention of obtaining choice billets for himself. In doing this, he walked a thin line, often alienating and generating deserved hate and disgust from his peers.

Hitchman was highly upset because Captain Wayne Knight was awarded the Chief Pilot Helicopter slot after Jim Coble left Air America in May 1964 to form and administer a company in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Expecting a CPH selection, a disheartened Hitchman quit Air America to work for Bird and Son.<sup>35</sup> He later returned to the Air America helicopter program after the deluge of SAR missions waned and we were earning more money.

When the Bell program was in its infancy in Saigon, and no other senior pilot wanted the CPH billet there, Bob eagerly took it. Playing favorites, his dictatorial and intimidating management methods were not appreciated by many of his charges, and people began transferring to the Udorn program as helicopter slots opened up. There were other unsavory episodes, and he was finally relieved by VPFO Taipei of his Saigon CPH duties.

Hitchman's ability to charm and push his agendas with management and Agency types, and worm his way into advantageous deals continued when the S-58T program was established, and one ship was assembled for clandestine work in Tainan, Taiwan. He continued to function for a while training Chinese pilots for cross border work. When the Chinese element failed to develop

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<sup>35</sup> I am not sure if Hitchman was ever aware that many of us, including the Author, spread the word that we would not work for him. Although not positive, this likely influenced Base Manager Ben Moore's selection of Knight.

and perform as envisioned, because of his seniority he chose to enter the Chinook program in Udorn.

In the fall, Hitchman was involved in an incident that stimulated a reprimand from Bill Hutchison, Assistant Chief Pilot Heavy Helicopters:

*"Investigation of your actions as PIC of Hook 103 on 28 October 1973 has brought out the following.*

- 1. You knowingly exceeded maximum allowable torque for an excessive period of time necessitating replacement of both fore and aft transmissions.*
- 2. Your log book entry of thirty seconds over torque did not tally with your subsequent trip report statement.*
- 3. After the above had occurred you then undertook a two hour and thirty-minute night flight from LS-69A to T08. This is contrary to company approved procedures.*

*The above actions reflect ignorance or total disregard of aircraft limitations, company prescribed policies and procedures, and overall Captain's responsibilities on your part.*

*As a senior Captain with Air America, such actions reflect poorly on your professional capabilities and you are hereby reprimanded for same.*

*Company standard operating procedures, company policies, and aircraft limitations all are predicated upon safety and operating efficiency. Failure to follow prescribed guidelines cannot, and will not be tolerated. It is expected that such deviations will not be repeated in the future.*

*In an effort to assist you in better understanding aircraft limitations and capabilities, you will be scheduled to attend the next CH47C recurrent ground school. In addition, you can expect to be given an upcountry check ride to evaluate your performance and capabilities to function as a pilot in command.*

*Please feel free to contact the Chief Pilot's office if you have any questions regarding the above. It is our objective to provide the best services possible while observing safe operating practices. We trust this will be your goal also."* <sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Memorandum to Captain RW Hitchman, from ACP/HH via CP/RW, MFC-NTD (Hutchison), Incidents on 28 October 1973, 10/21/73. There is no further information or action regarding this incident.

**D**espite the failure to accomplish the first ADR attempt we were not compromised, and Buddy Rogers was not giving up on completing the Sam Neua mission.

On the second, while the Maintenance Department was still struggling to return Papa Hotel Alpha to the line, I checked in at 1520 hours to maintain night proficiency and crew coordination in Papa Hotel Bravo with Ben Densley and Chuck Low. Toward the end of the two hour and forty-minute day-night flight, I detected a distinctive fuel odor. I was always proud of my ability to distinguish the difference in fluids used in helicopter systems, and my olfactory ability had alerted me to malfunctions and probably saved my bacon several times during my flying career. We recovered at the Udorn base at 2005. <sup>1</sup>

Training continued the following day and night. Bill Long replaced Low. Whatever fuel leak had occurred the previous night had been repaired, and we encountered no incidents. In addition to maintaining proficiency, we also assured that aircraft systems, including the LORAN navigation equipment, functioned properly. Pending the airworthiness of a sister ship, Bravo was ready for another ADR mission. (Three plus thirty-five, one plus fifty night.)

My recent stall incident and the latest communication from the Pratt and Whitney manufacturing plant in Canada, the Company

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Densley had served with an early Special Forces White Star team stationed at Khang Khay on the northern Plain of Jars. His team had to hastily evacuate at Lat Houang (LS-09) when communist forces displaced the RLG troops and rolled through the area in late 1959 and early 1960. Ben then entered the Army aviation training program and became a helicopter pilot. Following his Army commitment, he joined Air America in 1966,



Engineer including Jack Forney's team in Washington, and Udorn maintenance indicated there was sufficient concern about the state of our engines to warrant a memorandum from the Chief Pilot Marius Burke:

*"It has been found that we are still experiencing excessive compressor erosion in our PT6T-3 engines due to injection of foreign particles. In an attempt to eliminate or reduce this erosion, the following procedure will take effect immediately:*

*The fan pac control switch will be in the 'Normal On' position at all times when the aircraft is on the ground with rotors turning. This also applies to flight conditions below 30 knots IAS and in close proximity to the ground, i.e. landing approaches and take offs. Use of the automatic position under these conditions will be discontinued.*

*Problems may be encountered with overheating of the hydraulic oil in the system during extended ground operations. In such instances a modification of the above procedure may be necessary. Good judgment will dictate fan pac operations in such cases. For evaluation purposes a notation should be made in the log book whenever the 'Oil Hot' light comes on describing the conditions that precipitated it. This should include the length of time operated on that particular cycle before getting hot..."<sup>2</sup>*

A little more than a week later Assistant Chief Mechanic Hal Augustine issued a troubleshooting guide to aid all S-58T mechanics in analyzing and troubleshooting power problems. It

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<sup>2</sup> Memorandum to all S-58T pilots from the CP/RW Udorn, Fan Pac Use, 11/03/03.

Jack Forney Email, 07/19/99. "The final resolution (for our type of operation in Southeast Asia) was to effectively rebuild to new specifications to eliminate the effects of erosions due to dust ingestion that could not be prevented by the various particle separator schemes attempted. Had the Twinpac been 15% more powerful than it was, it could have tolerated the wear and still performed. But as it was degradation from new specifications just wasn't good enough."

was developed with the help of Bob Davis and the FCF department. It was predicated on aircraft being at an outstation with minimal equipment being at the disposal of the Flight Mechanic, since the procedures might be different at the Udorn facility where proper equipment was available.

### **ADDITIONAL ATTEMPTS TO DEPLOY THE ADR**

Al Cates, Bill Long, and I signed in at 1345 on the fifth. Flying Papa Hotel Alpha, we were slated number two to Scratch Kanach and Dan Zube in Papa Hotel Bravo, which again would function as the primary delivery ship. After standard procedures to prepare for the mission and a thorough check of helicopter systems and LORAN equipment, we launched for Bouam Long. Jim Pearson and Don Romes would support the mission with the sensitive electronic equipment installed in 74M.<sup>3</sup>

All went well until Romes began having trouble with the LORAN set, although they had conducted LORAN training in 9EX the previous night. While we returned to Site-32, Pearson recovered at Luang Prabang to have a technician ground check the navigation equipment connections and antenna. Problems with the aircraft compounded, extending to malfunctioning main landing gear. Since the Otter contained equipment essential to the mission, the night's activity was scrubbed and the crew RTB Udorn. (Four plus thirty-nine, three plus twenty-five night, two landings.) Upon hearing about 74M's problems, we were directed

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<sup>3</sup> Bill Leary interview with Don Romes. Don returned to Laos after flying DC-4s out of Tachikawa, Japan. He became involved in classified Special Project work involving the Twin Otters. Assisted by Berl King, Jim Rhyne had administered the Twin Otter program. Eventually there were two airplanes equipped with sophisticated electronic gear, including terrain-following radar and a prototype LORAN C. They flew a number of nighttime missions out of Pakse, serving as the communications link for helicopters involved in infil and exfil missions.

to RTB Udorn and recovered after midnight. (Five plus forty-five, three plus thirty night.) It seemed that the trouble plagued mission would never be successful.

Another attempt on the eighth began by staging at Long Tieng. Enemy patrols roamed the "Four Rivers" Sop Khao area at will. Because they could easily observe night movement into and out of Bouam Long, The Alternate staging area was considered less visible than Site-32. Flying Papa Hotel Echo, Tom Grady, Gary Gentz, and I were again assigned a secondary role to Scratch, who would install the ADR.

Also staging at The Alternate with us about 1600 hours, crewing N774M, Jim Pearson and Don Romes provided support. (Three plus fifty-eight, two plus fifty-night, one-hour instrument, two landings.)

Pearson departed before us to conduct a phone tap check and weather evaluation. We followed later, but the first attempt to insert the ADR was unsuccessful, so we returned to Long Tieng to await developments. Another attempt was also unsuccessful. After more than eighteen hours duty time, we returned to Udorn and blocked out at 0720 on the ninth. (Five plus thirty, three plus five night.)

Following a few days off to await better conditions, my crew of Al Cates and Chuck Low checked in at 1515 hours on the 14th for one more ADR attempt. Using Papa Hotel Bravo and the minigun we would support Kanach's crew flying Papa Hotel Echo.

Continuing current policy to stage at a safer location, we gathered at Long Tieng at dark. Rounding out our group were Jim Pearson and Don Romes with 74M. It was quite late when we all launched in order to arrive over the target site at an advantageous time from both an illumination and human perspective. Pearson went ahead to conduct a probe check and to be in position in case ADR alignment was required. It was not.

(Three plus forty-one, two plus forty-eight night.) Despite all our preparation, the mission was unsuccessful. We landed and blocked out in Udorn at 0220 hours. (Five plus twenty-five, three plus fifty-five night.) It was back to square one.

### **JARINA CONTINUES UPCOUNTRY**

On the tenth, Mike Jarina deadheaded to Long Tieng on 998 to join Willy Parker crewing Papa Foxtrot Juliet. He, along with other H-34 and Bell crews, continued supply and refugee work out of Site-20A. (Seven plus fifteen, sixty-seven landings, RON.)<sup>4</sup> Dick Theriault arrived the next day to fill out the cockpit crew for work around Pha Phai (LS-65) east of Padong. (Eight plus twenty.)

The crew continued work on Monday at Long Tieng, Site-65, and Ban Na. (Eight plus fifty-six, 113 landings.)

The 13th included work at Sala Phou Khoun (LS-260), the FAR firebase on Route-13 leading to Luang Prabang. (Nine plus twenty-four, eight-three landings.) The next day, slated to return to Udorn, Mike switched to Papa Foxtrot Gulf with Captain Tim Woosley. On the way home they landed at LS-53, the Phou Khao Khoua regional training center on Ritaville Ridge, to drop a Customer. (One plus twenty-five.)

Following a few days off, after the aircraft was cleared by the FCF department for upcountry flight, Mike returned to the field in Papa Foxtrot Juliet with Bunlue and Boonreung. Before RON, they performed refugee work in The Alternate area, Site-65, LS-15, Nam Ve (LS-335), and LS307-Ban Nam Yom Nea. (Three plus fifty-five.) The crew continued duties at Padong (LS-05), Site-65, and Ban Na Ban Nam Song (LS-363). (Nine plus thirty.)

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<sup>4</sup> Regardless of conditions, Captain Mike Jarina remained a true "work horse," always producing a large number of landings during the day.

Green replaced Bunlue late on the 23rd for work at the LS-260 road junction, LS-253-Ban Lee, and other landing zones. (Nine plus thirty-five, eighty-three landings.) After a stop at the LS-260 road junction on Saturday, Green, Boonreung, and Jarina supported the Bouam Long sector, which included the old site at Phou Vieng (LS-06) to the west, and San Pa Ka (LS-33) to the north of Phu Cum (LS-50).<sup>5</sup>

The next morning, the crew of PFJ returned to the Site-32 area and in addition to working sites around Bouam Long, returned to Lima Site-33. (Nine plus twenty, eighty-three landings.) After flying one plus ten to sites 272, 313, and 353 south of The Alternate, on the 26th, Jarina was relieved. He deadheaded to T-08 on 218.

Completing his month working in lower Military Region Two, on the 28th, Jarina, accompanied by Mike Barksdale, and Phil Velasquez ferried PFG to Long Tieng late. They serviced the area and RON. (Four plus fifty-five.) Switching to Juliet, Mike, Praton, and Dopd worked LS-335 and then Site-318. They then ferried the ship to Udorn for maintenance. (Two plus twenty-five, five landings.)

With time off the flight schedule, I had a sufficient period to gather my thoughts and write a long, newsy family letter home:

***"Ricky has chicken pox and it is all over his body and itches quite badly. I suppose the rest will get it soon.***

***Ricky received his report card and had an average rating. In talking to his teacher [Jay Allen] I found out that he is the least mature child in the class. I hope that he can make it. We***

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<sup>5</sup> Since Bouam Long was of some importance as a launch base for Special Project missions, cash crops, and Vang Pao's father-in-law, attempts were made to maintain a viable site in bad guy territory. To achieve this task, numerous listening posts were established on high ground overlooking the Sop Kao river valley.

*read a lot at home and he does ok. I have all his books now and am trying to keep up so that he won't fall behind. He is very slow. I would never make a good teacher.* <sup>6</sup> *We are using the cassette tape recorder for spelling and reading. It seems to help...*

*With this world-wide fuel crises we may not be working much. [In Thailand] gasoline has gone up in price and I hear that electricity is next. So, the U.S. isn't the only place affected. I don't know why we can't embargo all food stuffs to the Arabs.* <sup>7</sup> *I'm sure they would sing a different tune when their bellies got hungry. We are the dumbest bastards around to let people kick us in the pants all the time. What is the matter with our society? Maybe the liberals are right...Can you believe that we, the greatest nation ever, were stupid enough to let ourselves get into this situation? Our leaders are our own worst enemies. Why do we have to have such a great national defense budget when the only objects that harm us are ourselves and our leaders? Foreign dangers indeed. Don't show this to anyone, for I might be locked up for treason. Actually, that might not be a bad idea for I would be housed and fed better than most.*

*Tuie is group chairman now in the Red Cross.* <sup>8</sup>

*She is teaching Thai to Air Force personnel one hour a day and is paid 50 baht [\$2.50] an hour. She seems quite successful*

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<sup>6</sup> I was, and still am, impatient.

<sup>7</sup> In response to U.S. and other western nations' support of Israel during the Middle East Yom Kippur War, in October Arab nations embargoed oil. Within a relatively short time this led to gasoline shortages, and very unhappy Americans.

<sup>8</sup> Probably by default, as the Ed and Melissa Rudolfs family had left Udorn. As the only Thai, but also a naturalized American in the Udorn branch of the Red Cross, Tuie had five Air Force wives working for her, two of whom were German ladies. Tuie's duties were to create the work schedule, and any other paper work involved. There were perks, for any time the kids were sick, she had no problem obtaining medical attention at the USAF hospital.

*from what I hear. We are suffering a bit at home because of this women's lib, but I have lots of time off and can spend it with the kids and see that they get a good lunch."*

Letter Home, 11/17, 18/73.

As usual, Dad countered with some good advice.

*"Keep Rick on the ball but don't push him too hard. It is not too important for him to compete with the class brains. Glad Tuie has a real interest and as for you, don't take on the cares and worries of the world."*

Letter from Home, 11/26/73.

### **A NEW SAM NEUA PROJECT**

Over the past few days, we learned that, because of the problems at the original tree on Phou Nia, a search had been underway by PI lab technicians to discover another line-of-sight vector from the phone tap.<sup>9</sup> This involved extensive 3-D stereographic examination of both old and new aerial photographs and maps to satisfy all necessary criteria to receive and relay phone tap signals. After selecting what was considered a "perfect" platform to install the ADR, and obtaining coordinates of the new "only tree," they plotted a bearing to the tree, which was located a couple of miles northeast and lower than Phou Nia, and considerably closer to Route-65. All indications were that this new location would work.

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<sup>9</sup> Long ago, because of extensive exposure and difficulty encountered during our missions, we requested this to be done. It was always denied because no other tree was believed available. Now that the "only tree" theory had been debunked, I was both amused and dismayed that an alternate tree had been available all the time while we were overusing the number one ADR site.

The information was delivered to appropriate principals at Langley headquarters for examination, approval, and funding. However, processing requests through this channel required time. Receiving an answer depended on priority, motivation, and individual efforts from the head office. Finally, word arrived approving the new deployment site.

After all the previous commotion generated in the Route-65 area, Wayne Knight shuddered when he discovered the proximity of the new tree to the valley and road. Moreover, he was highly pessimistic regarding the new effort, and its potential risks for mission crews. He conducted discussions with us about his misgivings in front of Rogers, and made a strong negative representation about the suitability of the tree. Knight later admitted that he was quite surprised when we collectively agreed to accept and use the new site to deploy another relay device. <sup>10</sup>

With mission details in hand, during the afternoon of 20 November, I deadheaded to PS-44 on Twin Otter N774M to join others, and participate in a new round of intensive ADR training, structured and calculated to ensure success. This time, training and final selection would be different--sort of a game involving participant competition. No longer was a primary crew pre-determined to perform the task. According to Buddy Rogers, the choice would be delayed, to be determined after swapping crews and observation of their performance. Everyone had his own list champion. Scratch and I, having the most experience were always primary choices. However, presenting an illusion of fairness, all of us in the S-58T Special Project program would be considered for the job.

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<sup>10</sup> Wayne Knight Emails, 01/08/01, 01/09/01, 07/18/01. *"...the photo boys picked the tree with the criteria given. I recall Buddy calling and telling me they had found the perfect tree, so in this case I believe Buddy made the actual tree selection...with our input of course."*



It seemed like everyone eventually got into the act. The bunkhouse was loaded with principals, who constantly converged on and circulated in and out of the base. To me, the new normal seemed like bull sierra, for everybody was aware that Scratch was the best choice. Moreover, it would not have ruffled my feathers to have him selected as the primary mission commander. I was still paid regardless of my job. Still, we were no longer in charge of our fate, and had to rely on others methods.

That night, after Scratch had finished his training session, I flew two hours night and six landings in Papa Hotel Echo with Al Cates, and Flight Mechanics Gary Gentz and Bill Long. I was still generally the only person who had no compunction with sharing a cockpit with Al. I considered him a competent pilot, and a likeable individual. <sup>11</sup>

Using night vision goggles, we began by first hovering and then inserting the wooden dummy ADR over a tree close to the main buildings, so that technique and crew coordination could be observed by people on the ground. Then we gravitated back to short LORAN navigation flights that ended over the tree. We were to remain at PS-44 until crews felt satisfied and confident about mission success. We wanted to ensure that the job would be done properly this time. Having the luxury of time on our side, there would be no more hurry up missions to complete the deployment.

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<sup>11</sup> Bill Long Email. Bill overheard Al Cates telling the Customer that the reason the initial insertion failed was because Scratch may have panicked. Bill, who was an opinionated person, blew his stack and told Al to quit trying to make himself look good to the Customer at Scratch's expense. He added that he could not bake the pus on a pimple on Scratch's ass as far as pilot ability was concerned. Wayne Knight Email, 01/06/01. Wayne never knew Scratch to panic over anything in the twelve years he was acquainted with, and flew with him. The Author concurs with this assessment.

Sharing airspace with the crews of Papa Hotel Bravo, day and night flights followed. Swapping crews, I flew with Ben Densley and Al Cates. (Four plus twenty-five, two plus fifty night, six landings.) Long and Gentz remained the cabin crew.

During the day, when no other duties were scheduled, to relieve training stress, the mission, and to provide entertainment, the Customer encouraged us to use the weapons range on a rocky area northwest of our living quarters. Since Scratch and others preferred to lounge in the hostel, some Flight Mechanics and I were the only ones interested in taking advantage of the offer.

### **THE FIRE**

One day we set up the minigun to fire down range toward the southern rim of the plateau, where no one would be harmed. Curiously, the weapon generally worked fine on the ground as touted, but after one burst in flight it always let us down, when we actually needed it to suppress enemy fire. On this particular day, red hot tracer rounds from the gun set the high, bone-dry grass on fire. Soon the blaze developed into an inferno, with flames leaping twenty to thirty feet, or more into the air. Worse, a strong westerly wind began directing the fire toward our wooden living quarters. As trees reached the ignition point, and burst into flames from the intense heat, we hurried to alert personnel that we might soon be losing the camp. Don Stephens seemed unconcerned, but Scratch exited the building clutching the precious NVGs. Then Hutch, originally from New Mexico, suggested and described employing a backfire technique used in the west to contain the conflagration. I had never heard of this method to control brushfires, but at the moment it seemed a logical, valuable tool, and really the only remaining option.

Although the grass near the buildings was relatively low compared to what was already on fire, backfires were started in the nick of time, while the fire moved close to our housing complex. Like a miracle, Hutch's method worked. Without benefit of fuel to consume and perpetuate the fire, it reached our artificially charred area and extinguished. Hutch, in his infinite wisdom and vast experience, had saved the day. <sup>12</sup>

On Thanksgiving Day, Al Cates, a Flight Mechanic, and I continued both day and night training exercises. (Five plus forty, one plus forty night, ten landings.)

Consistent with the current philosophy of switching crewmembers for an ideal cockpit combination, after flying with Al Cates, Dan Zube joined me on the 23rd. I preferred Dan with me in the cockpit, for he and I had worked well together during the long and frustrating ADR missions on Phou Nia. He was the perfect cockpit companion for me. Without Dan's expertise guiding me to destinations, and patience during times of duress, I was not entirely confident of performing a successful mission. For missions subsequent to discovering the missing ADR, based on my glowing recommendation of his navigation skills, he had been working exclusively with Scratch. As usual, our training session

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<sup>12</sup> Although Hutchison's advice was beneficial the day of the fire, Hutch was not totally astute in the care and usage of military weapons. Sometimes we fired AR-16 rifles on the local range. One day, for some unknown reason, Hutch grabbed a hot gun barrel and badly burned his left hand. I flew him a few miles south to the PS-18 training base hospital, where a medic examined the injury and recommended that he immerse his hand in ice water for a couple days to reduce the pain, swelling, and blistering. In order to implement this, Bill walked around and flew in the left seat with his hand in a Skippy Peanut jar filled with ice. Although a painful experience for Hutch, it was a humorous sight for us. The PS-18 hospital was also utilized when an unlucky Customer sat on an angry scorpion.



Buildings at the PS-44 Special Project training base. The path from the bunk house led to our rocky shooting range. In a relatively short time, the fire reached the perimeter of our housing area.

Author Collection.

was smooth and pleasant. (Four plus fifteen, two twenty night, six landings.)

Saturday, I flew a day flight in Bravo with Wayne Knight and Bill Long. (Fifty-five minutes.) Later, Al Cates, Bill Long, and I conducted two plus twenty night training that included six landings. <sup>13</sup>

While Scratch and Wayne remained at PS-44 to conduct additional training, leaving Echo in place for other crews, late on Sunday afternoon, I departed for Udorn on Otter N389EX. (One plus forty-one deadhead.) Jim Pearson conducted a trip to PS-44 on the 27th in 74M, probably to return excess crews and Customers to Udorn. (Three plus nine, two landings.)

Flying 74M on the 29th, after a landing at The Alternate, Jim and Jake Wehrell went to Bouam Long to conduct local air drops at outlying positions and to acquaint Jake with the vagaries of landing at the site in an Otter. While there, he took inventory of aviation fuel for the following month's mission. (Three plus forty-five, eight landings.)

Except for two hours in the Link Trainer idiot box on the 26th, I was off the schedule for the rest of the month. When not tending to domestic details, shopping at the USAF post exchange, or checking the mail at Air America, I had plenty of time to write letters to friends and relatives. Of course, I could never mention what I was really doing in the Special Project.

*"We haven't been thrown out of Southeast Asia yet, but are not making any long-range plans. We have been informed of next year's pay raise in advance--a 50 percent pay cut...The cost of*

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<sup>13</sup> EW Knight Email. Wayne wanted to participate and/or observe in the Sam Neua mission, but was restrained by his management duties. He did have a lot of input into decisions and judgment in this final mission, but does not recall assessments for primary delivery crew during the November trip.

*living has been accelerating at a fast rate and we are feeling the effects of the worldwide energy crisis like everyone else.*

*Flying is way down and short of another breakout in the war I think it will stay that way. One can have too much time off, but it is nice."*

Letter to Chaplain Robert T. Anderson, USA in Alaska, 11/27/73.

**D**uring October the Watergate scandal reached such immense proportions that House Judiciary Committee hearings began on the distasteful subject of impeaching President Nixon. In his voluminous autobiography, Richard Nixon stated, *"By the end of 1973 my longstanding political opponents began consolidating their efforts to make sure that I would be impeached."*<sup>1</sup>

Earlier, because of escalating political issues surrounding the Watergate investigation, in early February 1972, Nixon selected James Schlesinger to replace CIA Director Dick Helms. Unhappy with Helms' reluctance to have the Agency accept responsibility for Watergate, Nixon sent his "hatchet man" to Langley to clean house and change the organization. With the help of Bill Colby (who later became Director), within seventeen weeks Schlesinger purged over seven percent of Agency employees, mostly clandestine types. However, by that time it was too late to salvage much of anything, for the scandal had exceeded a tipping point where neither the FBI nor the CIA was able to achieve anything to contain the issue.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> RN: *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Touchstone, 1978) 974.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Riebling, *Wedge: The Secret War Between the FBI and CIA* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 314.

Author Note: With the Watergate political issues continuing to cause problems in Washington, diverting leaders' attention from important issues, it is little wonder that our Special Project program managed to achieve anything of significance. Schlesinger's blood-bath tentacles extended to Southeast Asia where Agency people began disappearing from Long Tieng wholesale, and contract Case Officers were sent home. By late 1973, Jim Parker, "Mule," departed, leaving only a bare-bones crew at the site.

## **A GRIM SCENARIO**

Despite the ceasefire, the war was far from over for the North Vietnamese. Envisioning an offensive comparable to the 1972 Easter Offensive, during December, the communists began amassing huge stockpiles of munitions and rolling stock in the south to support such an undertaking, with the intention of toppling the South Vietnamese government, and reunifying both parts of Vietnam. To further enhance this project, fuel pipelines were extended to the A Shau Valley in South Vietnam and through Laos into Kontum Province. <sup>3</sup>

During December in Indochina, South Vietnam reported a large-scale attack by Northern regulars, which [possibly] signaled the beginning of full-scale enemy hostilities in 1974. Few American leaders accorded the Cambodian Lon Nol government much chance of surviving communist advances. Rebel forces were reported on the outskirts of Phnom Penh in December. The only western support was from unarmed reconnaissance missions over South Vietnam and Cambodia, but since there was a Congressional ban on U.S. bombing, despite what was discovered, U.S. air strikes were prohibited. <sup>4</sup>

*"Rick is over the chickenpox, but will have a couple scars. Now the other two have it, and Peter is full of the poxes. Amanda started yesterday and is not too bad yet..*

*The kids are excited about Christmas..*

*Tuie finishes up her spoken Thai class in a couple days...all [reports] indicate she has done a good job. Who would have thought it? She is still chairman of her ward group at the*

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<sup>3</sup> John Pratt, *Vietnam Voices*, Viking, 1984, 582.  
Author Note: With America out of the war and not likely to return, the communists had very little to fear from the exhausted and strapped South Vietnamese Army.

<sup>4</sup> *Asia* (1973-Back in Time)-World Book Online American Edition.



[USAF] *hospital. She is really gaining confidence, and even writing reports in English. Still a long way to go though.*

*I will be tied up in a project awhile, so this may be the last letter before the holidays."* <sup>5</sup>

Letter Home 12/2-3/73.

## **THE SELECTION**

Despite President Nixon's and CIA problems, something we were not privy to, we were accorded a tentative go-ahead signal from Langley for the ADR deployment mission in Sam Neua. There would be a final training period, followed by a contest to determine who would assume the primary role. The exercise would be conducted to foster a spirit of competition and enthusiasm between crews. It actually was anticlimactic, for everyone knew who would be chosen.

On Monday the third, several Special Project crews mustered at the Air America facility before noon to vet and ferry Papa Hotel Echo and Papa Hotel Bravo to PS-44 for the final selection of ADR deployment principals. We did not all converge on PS-44 at the same time, but during six days of rigorous competition pilots Hank Edwards, Al Cates, <sup>6</sup> Tom Grady, Lloyd Higgins, Scratch Kanach, Dan Zube, Wayne Knight, Bill Hutchison, and I arrived at the base to participate in the fun and games. Flight Mechanics involved were Chuck Low, Deak Kennedy, Bill Long, Gary Gentz, and Tom Neis. The full house included several Customers.

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<sup>5</sup> Even though the statement in the last paragraph is relatively innocuous and not specific, this was the first mention of the term *project*, and a hint that I was performing extra-curricular activities. Unsure about the status of the upcoming Sam Neua mission at the time of this letter, I did send two more letters home before the New Year.

<sup>6</sup> Al Cates RON two days. He flew a couple of day fights in Papa Hotel Bravo with Tom Grady and Tom Neis. In addition to standard training, the crew probably ferried supplies from Pakse to the base.

After ferrying Echo to PS-44 with Tom Grady, my initial day/night training session during this second period was conducted with Hank Edwards, and my original Route-65 cabin crew of Chuck Low and Deak Kennedy. (Four plus one five, one plus thirty-five night, six landings.) We worked mostly deploying the ADR, maintaining NVG proficiency, crew coordination, and adapting to night flying at various hours.

Flying Bravo, Scratch Kanach, Dan Zube, Bill Long, and Gary Gentz organized their own training exercises at a time that did not conflict with ours.

Keeping the same helicopter, Tuesday night I flew two plus five at night with Hank, Chuck, and Deak. Like the Vinh tap mission, the LORAN course and ADR deployment site was devised to emulate the mission course, and selected trees as much as possible. This was difficult to achieve, for we had trained extensively in the PS-44 area, and were intimately familiar with most terrain features and pre-selected trees that could be monitored by a Customer. (Six landings.)

It was approaching time for the final crew selection. More and more, it appeared to me that Hank Edwards would act as my second pilot and attend to the navigation duties. I had more confidence in, and preferred, Dan Zube as my navigator, but apparently, he was firmly locked in with Scratch. Of course, this was my fault, as I had recommended him as the best LORAN man in the group.

Riding as a deadhead pilot in 74M, Jim Pearson arrived with Captain Berl King, with whom he had conducted an upgrading check ride in Twin Otter 89EX the previous month. (One plus fifty-four.) King, a pleasant individual and good friend and close associate of Chief Pilot Jim Rhyne, was long connected with "Sneaky Pete" work. Along with others, he had flown many hairy

missions using the photo reconnaissance-configured Volpar 42Z.<sup>7</sup> Before returning to Udorn, their activity entailed an unspecified Special Project operation. (Two plus eighteen night, two landings.)

Dawn on the fifth at "the beach" produced more of the same-training heaped on top of even more training.<sup>8</sup> The only change in our Papa Hotel Echo crew was the appearance of Lloyd Higgins for some LORAN work. Since Dan Zube had entered the equation, I had not flown with Lloyd very much after the previous year's Cambodian penetration, and early road watch and log missions. I think it was Lloyd's choice to allow us younger pups to perform the primary job. He would often act as the secondary ship, carrying the minigun, or not participate at all. Despite an early rough patch during my first daylight Special Project mission into Cambodia, I quickly learned a lot about the unique work from the curt and crusty Higgins, and believed that I had matured considerably from those early days.

While we rode in 89EX to Ubon with Jim Pearson, Berl King, and Frank Renigar to obtain near term regional weather briefing for December from a USAF meteorologist, Wayne Knight and Tom Grady used our ship to conduct a brief training session. (One plus eight.)<sup>9</sup> Later in the day, Edwards, Low, and Kennedy joined me for training. (Four plus ten, two plus twenty night, seven landings.)

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<sup>7</sup> Jim Pearson log entry for 12/04/73.

Author Note: Berl King, who had been wounded in the wrist while flying a Porter north of Luang Prabang in Military Region One, "bought the farm" later in the States while performing unspecified Agency work.

<sup>8</sup> The Beach: Like the generic phrase going upcountry, I used this term to disguise the actual destination of PS-44, and the eroded white sand from rocks seemed to lend an adequate description.

<sup>9</sup> Wayne Knight Email, 07/18/01. *"Although his Director of Operations position would not have precluded participation in the ADR mission, he was never in consideration for primary/secondary ADR ship except as a backup. He was not trained to the same level of proficiency as we were."*

Quite frankly, I considered myself thoroughly trained for any ADR deployment, and, except for the necessity to locate a competent navigator I felt comfortable with, found the entire exercise becoming repetitious and boring. Despite Buddy Rogers' thinking and assertion to the contrary that anyone had been pre-selected, I was certain that Scratch should, and would be awarded the primary ship assignment for the ADR deployment. Without Dan Zube backing me in the left seat, I knew that I stood little chance of winning the primary billet. Although a very congenial and good person to have in the cockpit, Edwards seemed less confident and LORAN proficient during our work. He never measured up to Dan's superior ability in navigation, and the mutual feeling of rapport I shared with him. I do not know what Scratch felt about the situation, so I chose to remain silent on the issue.

There was another subject to consider. Extended and repetitious practice might benefit those less proficient, but it certainly would never replace actual conditions at the mission site that were always subject to momentary changes. Also, I had learned from the Larry Price episode that accomplishing a successful job was paramount; personalities never should enter the equation. This specialized work revolved around, and required, a total team effort. Moreover, we needed a profitable mission to boost our morale, and counter all the previous bad luck and failures.

Pearson and crew continued considerable local work. (Seven plus fifty-two, three nineteen night, five landings.) <sup>10</sup>

Pre-mission crews were selected on the sixth for what was humorously called a night dress rehearsal leading to a final competition for the primary slot the next night. Edwards,

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<sup>10</sup> Jim Pearson log entry for 12/05/73.

Kennedy, and Low were my crew; Zube, Long, and Gentz rounded out Scratch's crew. Wayne Knight, Lloyd Higgins, and their Flight Mechanic flew Papa Hotel Echo during the day to maintain crew coordination and navigation proficiency against the possibility that another crew was needed for logistics or, in the extreme, to perform the mission. (One plus thirty-two.)

At various times that night, in order to maintain familiarity with the two mission ships and LORAN systems, we switched aircraft. Switching ships was an excellent idea. Maintaining impartiality, no one could claim that one aircraft was better than another. Alternating launches, we first flew Papa Hotel Bravo one plus forty-five hours, and later two plus five hours in Papa Hotel Echo. (Ten landings.)

The exercise went well. Everything had coalesced to my satisfaction, and I felt good. After we finished and repaired to the bunk house, I thought that if we managed to accomplish what we had done that night, I might have a chance at winning the primary deployment assignment.

The final day of competition and selection arrived. To take our minds off what would occur that night, we reviewed maps of upper Military Region Two, and the latest black and white photographs of the current "only tree" in Laos. Reading, writing, and other interpolated learning was conducted by each individual.

Toward afternoon, the Customer briefed us on the method to be utilized that night for selection. Air America personnel and a couple of Customers would be pre-staged at various LORAN checkpoints along the round robin flight path to monitor our performance. Based on our ability to fly precisely over each point, and end at the selected tree, would determine the winner.

Before nightfall, flying Papa Hotel Bravo, Knight and Cates spent an hour positioning personnel at preselected waypoints.

Except for the route, the exercise largely mimicked the previous night. Switching aircraft again between PHB and PHE, we flew a total of three plus thirty night time. I landed ten times. Hank performed a creditable job for most of the night, but during the second run in Echo, he admitted that he could no longer navigate. Deviating from his previous focus and attention span, we failed to exactly overhead specific waypoints. Perhaps the LORAN set was the culprit, or Hank lacked sufficient concentration, tenacity, and experience to achieve a perfect result. During the exercise, I was just driving, so it was easy for me to judge. I had been there before with Scratch, and knew how difficult it was to navigate using LORAN gear, especially at night under duress.

As I expected, Zube and Scratch performed the established track perfectly. Despite all the hard work during this training phase, there was no remorse on my part. The best team had earned the right to conduct the primary mission. It was over. Primary and secondary were assigned. Now all we had to do was to await final approval, and the optimum time, and weather conditions to conduct the mission. <sup>11</sup> The next day after lunch, Edwards, Long, and I returned to Udorn in Hotel Bravo and blocked out at 1530 hours. (Two plus forty-five, one landing.)

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<sup>11</sup> Hank Edwards Email. *"When you and I lost the competition, Wayne promised me that I would be PIC on the lead bird for the insertion of ADR-2."*

Wayne Knight Email, 01/08/01. When asked about Hank's recall, Wayne thinks Hank was wrong about this. *"I never made any such promise. Selections were a joint process. I never worked unilaterally on these matters."*

Author Note: So much time has elapsed since this episode occurred, it is impossible to judge the veracity of either man's statement. Also, a person's aging selective memory often tends to obfuscate and color actual events.

Marius Burke Interview. Marius was aware of the exercise, but was not at the PS-44 base during the final competition for the ADR insertion. He indicated that one of the PI technicians in the laboratory was Paul Ishakawa.

We were all eager to conduct the mission as opportunity day arrived on the eleventh, when transportation picked up crews at their homes and delivered them to the airfield. It was 1320 hours when all of us gathered at the operations counter. Following a last-minute briefing at AB-1 and examination of current photos, we repaired to our respective ships, loaded our gear, and checked aircraft and electronic navigational systems.

Flying Papa Hotel Bravo, Edwards, Low, Kennedy, and I launched north about 1700 hours. Scratch and his crew preceded us. Jim Pearson and Don Romes followed in 74M to conduct an alignment check should the mission be successful. (One plus fifty.)<sup>12</sup>

Before we reached The Alternate, another Otter pilot, designated to check the weather, radioed that weather conditions in Sam Neua were adverse and not likely to improve, so we turned around and recovered to a remote portion of Wattay Airport to await better news. It never arrived. Based on the Otter crew's negative report, the AB-1 people scrubbed the mission. We were recalled, and blocked out at 2135 hours. (Two plus thirty-five, two hours night, five landings.)

Continuing a high alert status for a potential launch, I stood by at home the following day. In order to maintain both helicopter airworthiness and my proficiency, I was called to the airfield at 1645 on the 14th to retrieve an H-34 engine at Vientiane. Affording me one plus ten minutes night flying, Deak Kennedy and I were back on the Udorn parking ramp by 1920. The next night, Edwards, Low, and I flew Papa Hotel Echo two plus forty-five night, and conducted four landings to maintain proficiency and crew coordination.

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<sup>12</sup> Jim Pearson Log entry for 12/11/73.

## **THE FINAL ADR 2 MISSION**

After so much effort and expense, Monday the 17th proved the day we would successfully complete the ADR mission. Crews checked in to the Air America facility at noon for another antenna relay attempt. Adhering to standard procedures, there were three aircraft and crews involved. In addition to carrying the ADR device, Papa Hotel Bravo, the primary delivery ship, included Scratch Kanach, Dan Zube, Bill Long, and Gary Gentz. Papa Hotel Echo, designated the secondary and SAR Twinpac, held the minigun and was crewed by Dick Casterlin, Hank Edwards, Chuck Low, and Deak Kennedy. We were also highly cross trained in all canned aspects of the mission, and could have performed the antenna deployment had the primary ship encountered serious maintenance problems. After landing at a friendly site, the ADR could have been switched to my ship. Against something like this occurring, a backup ship, Papa Hotel Alpha crewed by Al Cates, Ben Densley, and Tom Neis, rounded out the armada. <sup>13</sup>

At the final briefing in Buddy's office, in addition to the SAR assignment, I was told to conduct several diversionary approaches to landings south and east of the actual antenna delivery spot.

Completing comprehensive aircraft checks and other housekeeping items, we taxied to the Q warehouse to load the ADR, minigun, M-60 machinegun, and ammunition. During the afternoon, we launched for Long Tieng to top off the fuel tanks. Accomplishing this, we proceeded to Bouam Long. Arriving about dark, we shutdown to await Jim Pearson and Don Romes' assessment of the weather and vehicular traffic in the Route-65 area. As

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<sup>13</sup> AB-1 personnel had generally considered all contingencies. Depending on aircraft and crew availability three aircraft had been employed in the past. Of course, the degree of training, experience, and proficiency varied among crews.



there was no Customer at the site, we picked our way to the underground operations bunker to await N774M's landing and the greenlight from Pearson to launch.

Since the area had been compromised by so many of our previous sorties, a decision had been made at the White House to conduct a late night-early morning deployment. No ifs or buts allowed. From a biorhythm and diminished efficiency prospective, we did not particularly like this approach. However, when we considered that people in the target area would be even more physically challenged, it did make perfect sense.

Pearson arrived with news to launch. Since there was no immediate requirement for them, Cates and crew remained at Site-32, while we made our way over the dark familiar-unfamiliar track toward Route-65 at moderate altitude.

Dan Zube easily navigated Scratch's crew over the selected area that was very close to the road, and would ensure line of sight from the tap. They arrived only a hundred feet from the tree. Having practiced inserting the ADR for a long time, Bill Long and Gary Gentz were confident of success. But Murphy and the unknown were always a factor. After identifying the correct tree, Scratch commenced a hover over the canopy. Before long it was apparent that the tree was not a suitable platform. Stereographic photographs they had studied portrayed it as a whole tree, but it was not. There was a little knot sticking out of the top. Each attempt resulted in the device leaning, and they were unable to properly deploy the antenna in a level position.

After identifying Papa Hotel Bravo's landing lights in the trees, I flew just above treetop level around the southern perimeter, making occasional slow diversionary passes toward spots, as if I was going to land. Some time passed. It seemed to me that it was taking far longer for the crew to deploy the

antenna than it should. I was becoming fatigued from the strain of wearing the NVG, conducting slow, low maneuvers over the heavy foliage, and fighting adverse winds that required full concentration, and power applications to prevent settling into the trees. Concerned, and assuming that something was wrong, I decided to check on Scratch's progress. I ascended to a level where I reacquired PHB's hover lights. Satisfied that Scratch was still working, I cautiously returned to diversionary activity.

First attempts to deploy the ADR failed, and the cabin crew of Bravo kept attempting to find an acceptable spot in the tree. Gentz was operating the hoist. He found it increasingly uncomfortable leaning over looking down at the wildly gyrating canopy created by the helicopter's downwash. Long was sitting on the plywood floor manipulating the ADR handle. Finally, a good spot was discovered, where the antenna sat in a relatively level position. When steady fives were evident on the oscilloscope, indicating proper alignment, and signal strength was relayed from Pearson's technician, the ADR was firmly placed in the canopy. The entire process had taken over twenty minutes, the longest elapsed time ever spent during a relay insertion mission. <sup>14</sup>

Finally, with the job complete, we returned to Bouam Long to await Pearson and crew's analysis of information flowing between North Vietnam and the Ban Nakay Pathet Lao headquarters. (Four plus sixteen, two plus forty-six night.) Apparently, the ADR was still in place, and functioning as planned, but this had been the case before. With success apparently assured, AB-1 advised us to head home at first light. We flew south with a sense of pride, knowing that after so long, with only partial

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<sup>14</sup> Gary Gentz interview.

successes and mostly failures, it seemed we had collectively accomplished the mission.

We blocked in after 0700 hours on the 18<sup>th</sup>. (Six plus forty-five, three hours night, four landings.) Buddy's celebratory booze was proffered, but being early morning not much was consumed. <sup>15</sup> Predicting future work, the elated Rogers indicated there might be a future plan to place another relay on top of Phou Bia, the tallest mountain in Laos. Despite our recent success, no one was overly thrilled with this new idea. <sup>16</sup>

Within two weeks or so no further signals were received from the relay inserted on the 17<sup>th</sup>. Photo reconnaissance eventually revealed the tree had been cut down and the ADR was missing. We were overwhelmed with remorse at first, but soon realized that we had been severely pushing the envelope by placing the device so close to inhabited and accessible areas. <sup>17</sup>

We had exhausted all our options and there were no further attempts to install an ADR in the area. Fortunately, and somewhat amazingly, during the lengthy and numerous phone tap operations in Sam Neua, there was no battle damage incurred by our group and no one was injured or lost. Like the frequent and intense military SAR operations in 1964 through middle 1965, when there were no losses, it seemed that Air America helicopter

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<sup>15</sup> Because of a health condition, Buddy Rogers never drank. Wayne Knight Email, 07/18/73.

<sup>16</sup> Phou Bia, the highest mountain in Laos, had a checkered history. Nikki Philippi had crashed a Bell there delivering a storage battery for a signaling device.

<sup>17</sup> Wayne Knight Email. Hank Edwards Email. Hank believed the ADR was installed too close to the original site and the enemy probably thought, "Here we go again," and managed to discover the relay. The enemy must have had a good idea of where to search and knew to look in the tree tops. They might have even used aircraft for daylight recons. Edwards believes that if the Customer had decided to use the alternate site earlier, the project would have been completed and running well before the crunch time. The idea would have been proven feasible, and the project may have received the extra year we had been promised.

crews lived charmed lives. <sup>18</sup> As it turned out, unknown to us, and despite Buddy Rogers' optimism, this operation marked our final Special Project mission.

### **JARINA MOVES REFUGEES**

During December, Mike continued to work with other Bell crews repositioning refugees to established sites within the government umbrella, where they would remain relatively "safe" from enemy pressure. On Wednesday the 12th, Mike, Jim Sweeney, and Bob Noble left Udorn for Long Tieng. Assignments during the day took them east to Padong (LS-05), northwest from The Alternate to Ban Na (LS-15), back east to Pha Phai (LS-65), and south to Ban Son (LS-272). Before RON, Mike logged eight plus fifty-five hours.

The following morning Papa Foxtrot Hotel's crew resumed the same work, but at varied sites. After landing at Moung Cha (LS-113), they went to Pha Phai and west to Padong, then Phu He (LS-255) southeast of Long Tieng, then the Sala Phu Khoun junction, and finally Ban Na. (Nine plus twenty.)

Taking a break from the Site-20A area, the crew was assigned to work Bouam Long. In addition to supplying numerous defensive outposts in the immediate LS-32 area, they also supported Shing Scha (LS-339) and Phou San (LS-336), located in the Phou Cum (LS-50) vicinity, twenty-one miles northwest of

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<sup>18</sup> Jim Pearson, Ted Mauldin, and Author recall: Naturally, we wondered about our future. Sometime earlier Velte had addressed our Special Project group indicating Air America was going to cease operations and commence commercial ventures. There would be some salary changes to keep the company on a competitive basis with the aviation industry. The Customer also indicated that we would be flying Special Project missions for a year after COB Udorn.





The battle-scarred Sam Tong wasteland as seen from the west. Once a thriving Military Region Two refugee center and the government seat for Xieng Khouang Province, the site was threatened, abandoned and then captured by enemy forces during March of 1970. For two years the surrounding mountains continued to support Thai and indigenous defensive positions protecting Long Tieng. Originally USAID, a large hospital, and Air America support buildings were located to the right side of the runway near the prominent karst.

Author Collection.

Bouam Long and across the "four-rivers" valley. (Seven plus fifty.)<sup>19</sup>

Refugees looking for a better life than the communists offered were moving out of "harm's way," and gathering at Sam Tong. On the 15th, Mike spent the day shuttling these folks south to Ban Son, where they could be vetted, separated into ethnic groups, and distributed to other locations. (Nine plus fifteen.) Later in the day, Mike Barksdale replaced Sweeney. Shuttles continued between Sam Tong and Long Tieng, where fixed wing crews could take the people south to sites on the Vientiane plain. (Nine plus twenty.)

After flying one plus ten hours to Phou Khao and Ban Na, Jarina was replaced by a new PIC, and deadheaded to Udorn on C-130 787. (Thirty-seven minutes.)

It had long been a policy to send unaccompanied pilots upcountry over Christmas, and allow those with families to enjoy the holiday at home. Mike Jarina, whose family resided in the States, fit into the first category. Flying PFH again, Mike, Pranat, and Boonreung left Udorn on the 24th for Long Tieng. Moving refugees away from the enemy was still the prescribed order of the day. The crew worked all day moving people and their household goods from Padong and Ban Na south to high villages at Phou Kang Neua (LS-363), and Ban Nam Song (LS-337). RON LS-20A. (Ten hours, forty-eight landings.) On Christmas Day it was more of the same. Conducting sixty-seven landings, Mike and his Thai crew worked at Pha Phai, Padong, Ban Son, and Ban Na.

On Wednesday, Benvenuto (Ben) Sabino, and Sabai replaced Pranat and Boonreung. Ben, a Filipino, was one of the original

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<sup>19</sup> There may have been method in Jarina's assignment, as our ADR operation was imminent, and intelligence was required by the Customer regarding enemy movement in the area and any threats to Bouam Long.



Air America employees in the helicopter program, with years of aviation experience. He had worked with the Air America organization both as a ground and Flight Mechanic since 1960. Like Bill Wilmot, while crewing the H-34, he managed to accumulate "stick time" in the cockpit. He obtained the necessary commercial helicopter license in 1970. In 1972, he achieved First Officer status in the UH-34D. <sup>20</sup> With gobs of seniority, he moved into the Huey when a First Officer slot opened.

After working locally, the crew was assigned to Bouam Long. Following a trip to Ban Son they worked north at Shing Scha (LS339) and Phou San ten plus eight. <sup>21</sup> The next day marked Jarina's last logged flight of the year. After flying three plus five between Padong and Long Tieng, he deadheaded to Udorn on a CASI Twin Otter. <sup>22</sup>

## **CHRISTMAS**

1973 marked our final Christmas in Thailand. I did not have to put anyone in jail this year, but the day was not without incident.

With the ADR in place and (temporarily) producing information, no additional Special Project missions planned, and with STO looming on the 26th, I was off the schedule for the rest of the year. This afforded me quality time with the family, and the opportunity to correspond with people in the States:

**"Ted Cash is back** [after rehabilitating from his March upcountry Huey crash that injured his spine].

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<sup>20</sup> After Air America's Udorn close of business in June 1974, Ben Sabino continued his flying career in Indonesia and Malaya, until he was killed in a helicopter accident.

<sup>21</sup> The work in the north may have been in conjunction with Jim Pearson and Jake Wehrell's 28 December mission in 74M to check for ADR signals.

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

*There are more personnel cuts [to take] place, but they are not published yet. Things look shaky, but can change quickly."*

Letter to Dan Carson in Scottsdale, Arizona, 12/20/73

A letter home followed dated 12/21/73:

*"The packages arrived safely, but we haven't opened much as we don't want to disturb the contents...We will probably have to rat-hole some of the presents for Peter's birthday in January.*

*The kids are counting off the days until Christmas and are excited. I think Ricky is beginning to suspect certain things about the whole deal but he is sly about it all. We have two live trees again this year, one outside and one inside..*

*Ricky's teacher [Jay Don Allen] says he is doing better in school, but still is slow. He reads well at home. We have finished a reader of 360 new words and are starting a new harder one..."*

We were invited to a couple of Christmas Eve parties. One was at the Buddy Rogers' home, probably because of Tuie's special relationship with Pauline. The home, a concrete structure, was located inside a high walled enclosure far down narrow Sichomcheun Road. It was attended by most American spooks who worked in the White House, but relatively few Air America personnel, like the Burkes and Vern Clarkson, were invited. Knowing the kids would be up early we did not remain too long at the Rogers' party.

*"Another Christmas come and gone. Ricky, of course, got up at two in the morning to check on things. The children opened all the presents and like all kids wanted more. Your packages were all in good shape...[The post office would not mail the BB-gun I ordered for Rick.], so you don't have to worry about that.*



[My Father was against this when I told him.] *I intended to give him instruction and keep the BBs separate. I want my boys to learn early and do things. I can remember you taking me along hunting and fishing, but you never let me shoot a gun or actually fish that I can remember. I have no appreciation of these things today. Maybe this is not too bad actually.* <sup>23</sup>

Letter Home, 12/30/73.

### **KIDNAPPED**

On Christmas Day an Air America children's party was planned off base in the afternoon at one of the houses in town to discourage the standard free loading that went on every year with people just coming for the candy. It was a past problem with any Club Rendezvous-sponsored function.

*"I was going to take Amanda to this party but got waylaid by a bunch that came over to the house and carried me away in my PJs. This proceeded to happen all over town singing, drinking, and picking up people along the way until the day was almost gone. It was the most spirit that I have ever seen in the time I have been here."*

Letter Home, 01/14/74.

Often fact is stranger than fiction.

About 1100 hours, while taking a break from fun with the children, who were enjoying their presents, I was lounging on the couch in my PJs and short maroon colored bathrobe that I had purchased at the Bangkok post exchange, when I heard a vehicle horn in front of the house. I thought this strange, for we were not all that social, and did not have too many visitors in this

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<sup>23</sup> I learned how to fire a .22 caliber rifle and appreciate weaponry in the Boy Scouts at Camp Watchung, Glen Gardner, New Jersey.

part of town. Moreover, to my knowledge I was not on the flight schedule.

Stepping out the door onto the porch, I discovered that Deak Kennedy, Bill Long, and Chuck Low were in Deak's Japanese-manufactured truck. The trio was making the rounds singing standard Christmas carols, while at the same time expecting to be rewarded with cold beer. Very contrite, I explained that I never drank at home, and had no libation for them. Not to be outdone, mocking my inability to provide adequate Christmas cheer, they enacted the only penalty they could. They good-naturedly picked me up, and carried me off to their truck. Seemingly a spontaneous act, it appeared like something planned. These bruisers were strapping, aggressive boys, and it was unwise and fruitless to resist them.

Placing me between them on the bench seat so I could not escape, they drove off, while my family watched in awe, as their dad and husband was abducted. I could not believe the situation myself. Still, after sharing so many hairy experiences with them, I loved these guys and considered them the life blood of the Special Project. Resigned to my fate, I relaxed and elected to enjoy whatever drama lay ahead. Dressed as I was, without any baht, escape would have been embarrassing and netted me little.

We drove to a couple of other locations, Scratch Kanach's included, sang a few songs, and drank a little beer. At each house, I was obliged to explain my plight, which people thought cute and highly amusing.

We ended up at Frank Bonnessa's place on Benjarn Road, not far from home. Many fixed wing personnel and their wives were there partying (Captain Connie Siegrist, et al). Dressed as I was, for a while I was quite a hit, and my explanation tickled everyone. As time elapsed, my three captors' interest in me waned and they left, but I was having too good a time to leave.

During the festivities, which included a lot of pilot shop talk, Don Romes walked over to me, and unexpectedly planted a large wet kiss on my cheek. I was shocked and confused, until he began recalling the 1963 episode when I looked for him for two days after he crashed a Helio Courier in the trees west of Sam Tong. After he was found, I delivered a five-gallon Jerry Can of water using the hoist. I had long forgotten the incident, and Don's effusive and boozy gratitude flattered me. <sup>24</sup>

Eventually the novelty of the gathering wore thin. As the temperature increased, I realized that I was becoming sweaty, and probably olfactorily offensive in my sleeping attire, so I departed and, as casually as possible, walked the short distance home. I had intentions of showering, changing into acceptable clothes, and possibly returning to the party, but when I walked into the house, no one was there. Taking the Ford Cortina, Tuie and the kids had gone to another Christmas Day party, so I elected to stay home. <sup>25</sup>

With Laos devoid of military action, my letters to the parents assumed more of a newsy nature:

***"This is really a seasonal Christmas. It is the coldest year that I or anyone can remember. Temperatures are in the low 40's at night and that is without any heat. I think if we can survive so can the American people. Mention this when some coddled individual complains of being cold next time.***

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<sup>24</sup> This delivery was quite challenging. Unable to land, while hovering downwind and out-of-ground-effect on the side of a mountain, the left window vibrated out of the window jam. For the entire story, see the 1963 book.

<sup>25</sup> My wife and I did not talk about the episode very much, but I do not think Tuie ever believed that I was not privy to the plan to abduct me. Anyway, there was no harm done and the incident was relegated to the annals of my Air America experience.

*Have you any trouble getting gas or anything? We have had two increases in Thailand putting the price of a gallon over 60 cents.*

*Yesterday I repaired some of the old broken toys...The model gliders didn't hold up too long but I have managed to glue two together and they are in fairly good shape. We will go out to the border police camp [on the Sakon Nakhon highway] and fly them and watch the AAM crowd fly their radio-controlled aircraft [Jim Rhyne, Lloyd Higgins, and Herb Baker were a few involved in this activity].*

*Amanda has had her first bad cold. We were going to Bangkok on STO and have my front tooth fixed. She was going to stay here with [Khun Yai], but before I left, I took her temperature and it was more than 104 degrees. We cancelled out and stayed here. She is better now and Tuie has hot water boiling in her room to break up the congestion.*

*I bought myself an electronic calculator for Christmas and it is great. It really speeds up figuring, especially around tax time. I got it from Montgomery Ward [for 75 dollars]. This outfit is just like Sears. If they don't have something they substitute and it is usually something you don't want...*

*Happy New Year."*

Letter Home, 12/30/73.

The oil embargo pain continued to the New Year:

*"Yes, we are feeling the energy crunch in every way. Was very low on gas this AM and all the stations here about were closed tight. Finally found a Citgo station open on Route-22. They felt sorry for me and filled my tank otherwise I would have been stranded in Middlesex. Cost per gallon 47.9 cents."*

Letter from Home, 01/16/74.

*"...one gets feeling mean because of the gasoline situation. Getting up at daybreak to get in line [at the gas station] for the opening at seven and then only allowed three gallons at a time. The new ruling is that you can only get gas if your tank is below one half. However, I have made friends with a station owner of a Gulf station and today he filled me up as I have an even license number..."* <sup>26</sup>

Letter from Home, 02/28/74.

The people of Southeast Asia and the surrounding region ended 1973 with a modicum of optimism for the region's immediate future. Given the standdown of warring factions, there existed a real *"potential for peace, orderly development, and growth."* The withdrawal of Western powers portended an opportunity for Asians to settle their own unique problems unimpeded by extra-territorial entities. Of course, pressing economic problems like increased food production and the burgeoning energy crisis would have to be addressed in order to foster lasting progress. <sup>27</sup>

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08/13/21, 02/14/22, 05/05/22. ©

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<sup>26</sup> The oil embargo was over by March 1974.

<sup>27</sup> *Asia* (1973 Back in Time)-World Book Online American Edition, paraphrased.

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