

**RICE, REFUGEES, AND
ROOFTOPS**

AIR AMERICA, INC.

BOOK FOUR

1963

BUDDHIST ERA 2506

YEAR OF THE RABBIT

Harry Richard Casterlin

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INTRODUCTION

While tensions on the Plain of Jars (PDJ) continued to accelerate between leftist Pathet Lao and Neutralist military factions, political constraints on Air America helicopter flying in Laos required our Udorn unit to seek work for anyone who might utilize our services. However, despite the stand down of helicopter usage, under the auspices of the Royal Lao Government, Vientiane-based Air America fixed wing aircraft crews continued to airdrop USAID supplies to remote locations in Laos. Helicopter crews did not enter Laos overtly unless tapped to recover an occasional Helio Courier, damaged while landing on a marginal mountain strip. Therefore, United States Information Service (USIS), Thai Border Police, Army Strategic Communications (STARCOM), and Joint United States Military Advisory Group Thailand (JUSMAG Thai) work served as a temporary mechanism to justify the program survival. As a result of the minimal work, management relocated some personnel and terminated selected crewmembers. A few disillusioned pilots, failing to achieve monetary rewards and experience high adventure, willingly departed Southeast Asia. On a personal level, the First Officer billet locked me into what appeared to be a permanent status with no relief visible on the horizon.

During the spring, fighting in Laos erupted again in Military Region Two (MR-2) with Kong Le's Neutralists ejected from previous positions in western portions of the Plain of Jars. This action stimulated Washington to consider methods to counter the enemy offensive. Part of this plan resulted in reintroduction of our helicopters into Laos to haul the "bullets, beans, and bandages" necessary to support and conduct the war. The movement resulted in management, with the

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Customer's authorization, to upgrade both Howard Estes and me to Captain status. Soon afterward, because of the escalating requirements in Vietnam, and perhaps due to a lack of foresight as to future events in Laos, thirteen of our H-34s were cycled back to the USMC. The reduction of the assets diminished our inventory to a mere handful of ships to perform missions. It also reduced the already meager flight time among too many pilots. Still, we pressed on, resupplying beleaguered positions, removing hundreds of refugees from harm's way, and establishing new landing sites calculated to create a thorn in the side of the enemy.

By the fall, helicopter flight hours increased briefly, aided by the timely introduction of three discarded U.S. Coast Guard helicopters. However, because of aircraft losses and ongoing maintenance problems, instead of increasing, flight time waned.

In Military Region Two, enemy seasonal aggressive tendencies were countered by Vang Pao's Meo guerrilla thrusts on the periphery of Xieng Khouang Ville. After our mountain forces expanded into new territory and seized better positions to harass and interdict enemy supply lines, the year ended with a slight net gain in re-establishing the pre-Geneva Accord theoretical Military Region Two demarcation line.

A trite military statement related to me by a beloved company Gunny Sergeant during Training and Test Regiment at Quantico, Virginia, stated in salty Marine Corps vernacular, "*A piss poor war is better than no war at all.*" This resonated in my mind and seemed to aptly describe the 1963 Lao conflict. Moreover, the cliché seemed a satisfactory description, for the war's slow, low intensity pace enabled me to navigate and learn the Military Region Two area during a relatively risk-free environment, unhindered by flying missiles. Except for vehicle-

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mounted weapons or fixed anti-aircraft artillery positions on certain portions of the Plain of Jars, where we never intentionally flew, enemy threats were limited to small caliber weapon fire. Unless one became seriously disoriented in weather and unintentionally wandered in range of large anti-aircraft (AAA) weapons, circumnavigation at altitude around known threats prevented nasty incidents.

In retrospect, this period marked one of the most relaxing periods during my almost twelve years of flying in Laos. At first, I did not earn a lot of money, but was content just to be flying again, and performing "normal" work. However, I was still concerned about job longevity. It appeared to me that buried in the United States Government's (USG) undeclared policy of the ability to "walk away from a situation should events so dictate," funding constraints took precedence over any serious conflict resolution.

A note regarding the narrative in this and future books: Emulating radio show Paul Harvey, in order to create a continuous flow of narrative for the reader and a more complete storyline, in some cases where an incident would normally only be viewed from the cockpit, I have employed ground-based eyewitness accounts to more fully elaborate events. The talented and highly entertaining Harvey would have called this "the rest of the story."

HRC

When Air America H-34 helicopter flying ceased in October following the 1962 implementation of the Geneva Accords, the United States Government (USG) maintained a wait-and-see policy to observe future developments in the clouded Lao political and military situation. In order to justify and maintain a semblance of a viable helicopter operation, local Air America management negotiated a contract toward the end of 1962 with the American military mission in Bangkok to utilize a pair of our H-34s and double crews to employ at their discretion. In its infancy, no briefings were forthcoming from management regarding the program, except that no project pay was involved in the work. When a few people griped about the dislocation, Abadie wisely reminded them that the temporary work just might save all our jobs.

One day after a rollicking New Year's Eve party at the house, the Operations Department temporarily assigned me to Bangkok to conduct JUSMAAG missions. This temporary duty was projected to last one week for Captains. There was nothing specified for First Officers.

Accompanied by another helicopter crew piloted by Captain Viril Black and Jim Spillis, our crew, consisting of Captain Don Wright, rangy Texan C.P. Wyatt, and me, flew Hotel Romeo to Don Muang Airport. This location was referred to as Sierra Zero-Nine (S-09) for radio calls and logbook entries. Generally tracking a 211-degree heading for 224 nautical miles, and three plus hours, took us over Thai countryside, jungles, and mountains of the Korat Plateau toward our destination. Since we did not utilize a fixed landmark such as the narrow-gauge railroad track on our route to Udorn while in the Crotch, I attempted to navigate

using the "one over the world" chart, a large 1:1,000,000 map that enveloped most of my side of the cockpit.

Directly following the Christmas holiday, CJ Abadie had dispatched Howard Estes and his PIC to Bangkok on the initial MAAG duty. Some missions involved USAID work, others ranged to outlying Special Forces camps yet to be established or still in development. After trouble getting his family to Udorn, Estes took exception to an assignment separating them so soon after their arrival. Therefore, to placate Howard, Ab graciously allowed Deanie and the children passage on our ship to dovetail with Howard's scheduled time off. For the first time since we rented Singwa's house, our exodus had effectively left the place empty. We could only speculate what the snooping landlord would do there in our absence. ¹

Exiting the hills well north of Bangkok, we intersected the United States Aid for International Development (USAID) sponsored Friendship Highway. In Thailand, development of the rudimentary highway system was greatly influenced by topography. Mountain ranges and rivers extended both north and south, and with Bangkok the pivotal center of trade and population, major arteries flowed in a north-south direction from the city, with secondary roads intersecting them laterally.

Flying too low to receive input from the non-directional beacon, we utilized the macadam compass. Then we contacted Bangkok Approach Control on VHF frequency 119.1 and the tower on 118.1 megacycles. After landing we taxied to and parked on the commercial side of the airport in the designated Air America area close to "Red" Fredrick's C-46. Located a safe distance from foreign commercial jets, it required a good walk on the hot tarmac to the nondescript terminal. At the small Air America

¹ Howard Estes Phone conversations, 08/31/91, 07/16/92.

office, a Chinese dispatcher advised us of a JUSMAAG mission scheduled for the following day.

BANGKOK

Late in the day, the Air America dispatcher arranged Company transportation to drive us eighteen miles into the city to the Plaza Hotel. The blue Volkswagen bus covered the first ten-mile segment rapidly, but then at the city outskirts, our journey bogged down in multi-faceted congestion. Small Japanese-manufactured cars, trucks, Tuc-Tucs (a three-wheeled motorized samlor), bicycles, milling people, endless traffic lights, roundabouts, and turns all added to the chaos. Despite the overwhelming heat, clouds of dust, and noxious exhaust fumes, the shops and bustling humanity were somewhat interesting to observe. However, I did not look forward to a steady diet of the Bangkok rush hour traffic.

We finally arrived at the old Plaza Hotel, nothing on a par of the modern Rama Hotel where I had stayed one night while still in HMM-261 during the Third Marine Expeditionary (MEU) flap. Located on Patpong Road #2, a short, dead-end alley parallel to Patpong Road and perpendicular to Suriwongse Road, the hotel and the Plaza Annex had long been the prime billeting locations for transient Air America crews. One could easily surmise that remaining there afforded crew concentration for ease of transportation to and from the airport. Furthermore, a phone provided Operations contact with crews for schedule changes or additional missions.

A few steps south was Patpong Road, location of the Air America and Civil Air Transport (CAT) offices and other three-story shop house businesses such as the moneychanger, Johnson Ma. Positioned in the hub of the nightlife district, unattractive bars, nightclubs, restaurants, and a few

international companies lined both sides of the street. Some enterprises catered to the prurient interests of well-heeled tourists who could afford to patronize them.

The history and development of the Patpong Road area began when immigrant Chinese, Poon Pat, awarded the family name of Patpongpanich by the King, purchased land in the Suriwongse-Silom road area from the government in 1946 to use as a family compound. During the war, the property had been commandeered for a Japanese military headquarters. The son, Udom, who had studied business in America, envisioned building a road and developing the area into a lucrative business enterprise by renting buildings to foreigners. Using Western style methods that appealed to foreign businessmen, he enticed them to rent his properties. From that time, the area prospered and still flourishes today. ²

Since our flight time (especially project pay) was required to be endorsed by the Customer and then K.K. Wang's Taipei accounting team, paychecks were delayed a month. Because of the extended pipeline, we paid for all our expenses upfront. After the fact, we discovered that the Company-allowed seventeen dollars and fifty cents per diem allowance barely covered regular expenses, much less manly extracurricular nighttime activities. The prime reason for a shortage of funds stemmed from Taipei accounting department summarily withholding an eleven-dollar Plaza Hotel charge. Naturally, the remaining pittance of six dollars and fifty cents scarcely covered daily food requirements for a healthy person. In addition, adding insult to injury, our small Udorn provisional allowance was prorated for any time an employee was assigned to Bangkok. As a

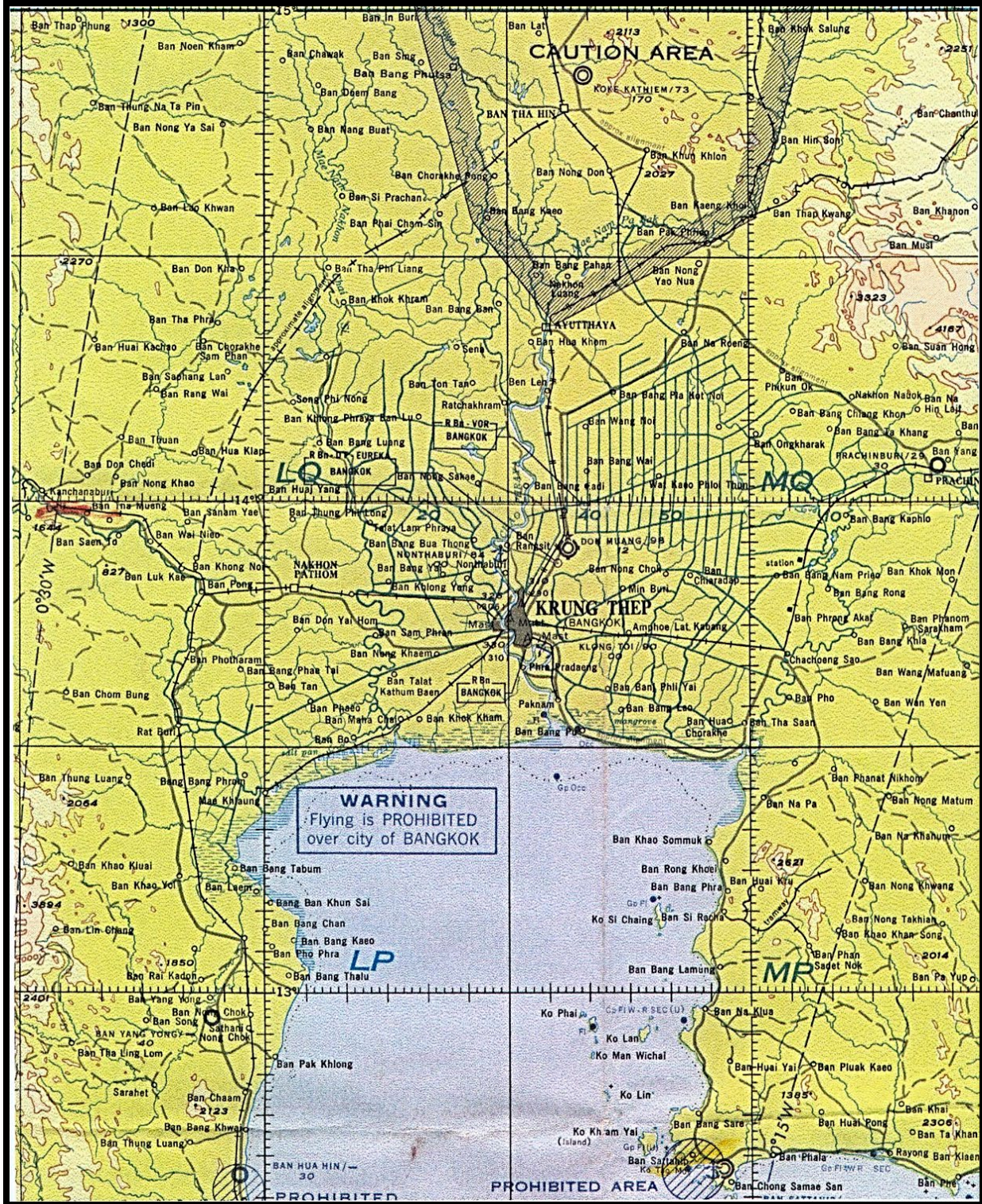
² MacAlan Thompson, Email, 05/15/99.

First Officer struggling to make ends meet, the whole scenario, smacking of owing one's soul to the company store, seemed a bitter pill to swallow. Resentment over Company billeting policy escalated when we discovered that Filipino crew chiefs were allowed to seek accommodations at other less expensive hotels with tariffs between three dollars and fifty cents and five dollars per night, but we were not allowed to take advantage of these lower rates. Naturally, rumors abounded that the local individual in charge of crew billeting was receiving kickbacks from the hotel, a common practice in Asia.

Following check in, while crossing the lobby to the elevator, the door opened and a casually dressed man stepped out. He looked at our prison gray uniforms and then our baggage tags, and hurriedly said in passing, *"Oh. You must be Air America employees. I want to talk to you later."* I looked at the wiry guy and shrugged, believing him to be a reporter, and someone management had cautioned us to avoid. His overture really did not bother me anyway, for at the time I knew little about the Company or the upcountry operation. However, the entire exercise became academic, for I never saw the man again.

Our first trip was planned to the highlands of Lop Buri (Sierra-15). Historically, Lop Buri was one of the oldest capitals of the ancient Khmer civilization, which expanded its power to the town of Lavo and Lop Buri at the beginning of the 10th century. The Khmer ruled the area through the middle of the 13th century until Thai who moved from the north and settled in the region revolted, then fought against them, and declared their independence. By 1664, King Nari of Ayudhya (Ayutthaya), with the help of French architects, created a second capital at Lop Buri.

In 1951, the old capital eventually reverted to a large training area for the CIA-sponsored Border Police and currently



Author Collection.

was used as a Royal Thai Army special warfare center and Special Forces camp run by Lieutenant Colonel Tienchai Sirisumpan.³

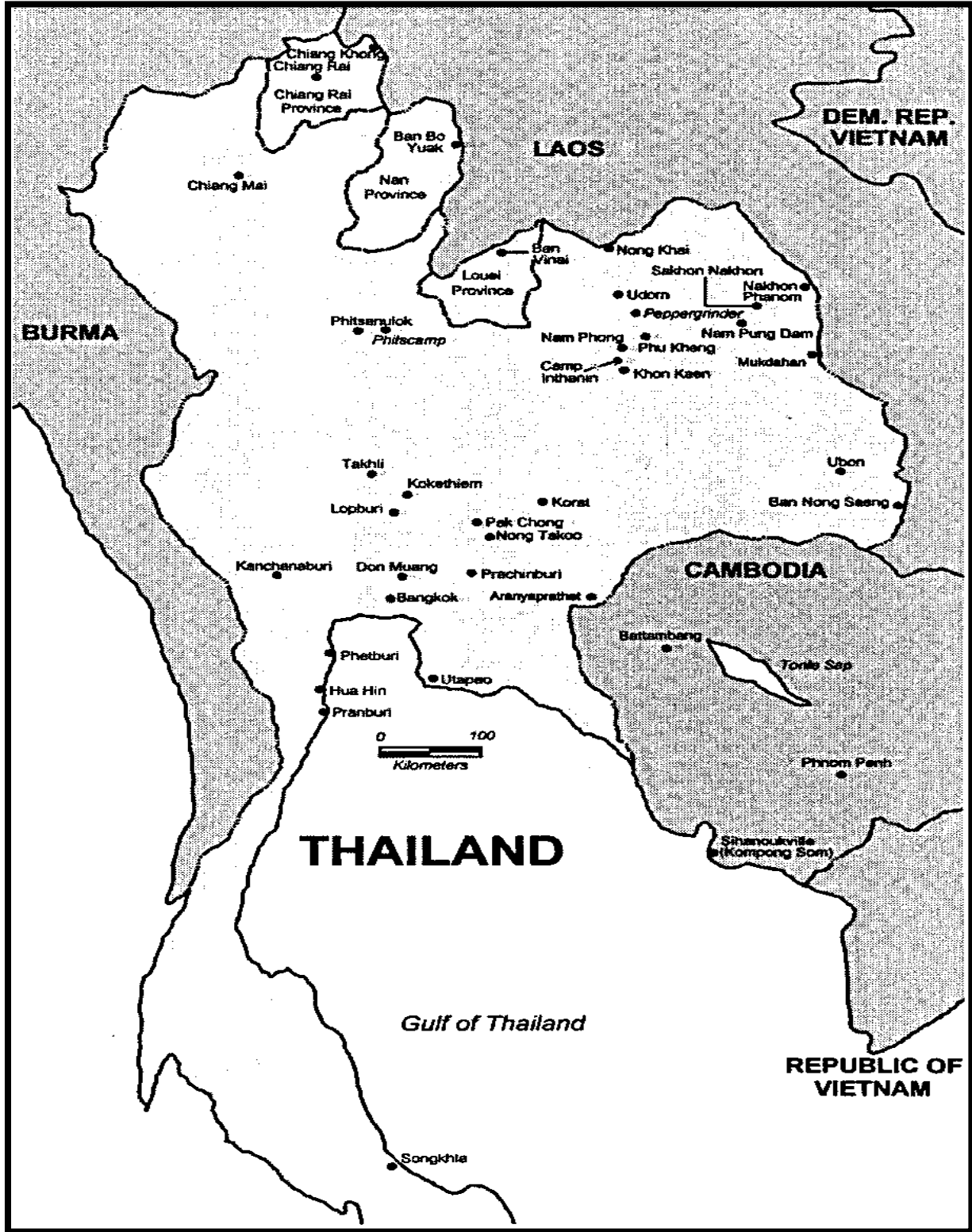
JUSMAG WORK

We did not wait long at the airport for the appearance of our uniformed American passengers. Navigation proved easy, for during the sixty-mile flight north we remained east of the Chao Phaya River and railroad track, then soared past the ancient and historic Ayutthaya capital and on into prohibited airspace that encompassed the military complex. The camp and army school were located adjacent to the Koke Kathiem airstrip in the center of the prohibited area.

While our passengers departed to accomplish their tasks, I conducted an interesting conversation with a U.S. Army major about the area's colorful history. I believe he must have also been something of a geology buff, for he stated that during previous eras the area had formed the country's shoreline. Being polite, I was skeptical until reading in the Bangkok English language newspaper that whalebones and gold coins were discovered just south of Lop Buri. After we left, I thought the week might be not only a good sightseeing one, but also quite educational.

During the beginning of our Bangkok hiatus, JUSMAAG had a number of flights planned for us. Over the next few days, we flew missions generally within a fifty-to-sixty-mile radius of Bangkok to planned, established, or recently built Thai Special Forces camps at Rat Buri (Sierra-64), Phet Buri (Sierra-33), and other locations. If fuel was not available at the site, we attempted to scrounge a drum or two for hand refueling. I seldom

³ Reference Bill Lair Book One-*Genesis*.



Graphic showing some JUSMAAG work areas in the Bangkok region.
 Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, page 428.

was privy to what function the Americans performed at these sites and could only surmise that it dealt with inspections and advice regarding training.

More or less an introvert, Don Wright did not converse very much, but the Southerner eventually warmed up a bit and related a few stories about his Korean War experiences. While I was still in high school, Don, in the capacity of a machine-gun unit sergeant, had been one of many U.S. Army soldiers challenged to hold the United Nations front lines. One night his defensive position was attacked by seemingly inexhaustible human waves of Chinese troops. As trained, he mowed down untold numbers of men, and then, after expending all his ammunition, and without likelihood of resupply, he and his crew ran like hell for prepared secondary positions, where they rallied, eventually thwarting the offensive action. I easily related to his stories, for I had fraternity brothers and friends at Duke University who painted an equally frustrating side of the war.

Most helicopter pilots arriving in Southeast Asia hoped to erase past debts during their employment. In the months before the Geneva Accords signing in 1962, many pilots earned and accumulated sufficient capital to consider other vocations. No exception, Don, then flush with cash, envisioned a positive goal. His dream included returning to Missouri to apprentice and read law with an established attorney before becoming an attorney. I did not say what I thought, but was skeptical of this method, for it sounded archaic; perhaps something aspirants to the profession had accomplished over a hundred years ago. ⁴

⁴ Don Wright never achieved his original goal to become a lawyer. Working for the Mobile Oil Company out of Morgan City, Louisiana, he retired as a manager of flight operations.

As a day off was sandwiched between the first three flights, I strolled south on Suriwongse Road to observe the numerous sights and sounds and acclimate myself to the area. Many arteries in the city were named after past monarchs. Suriwongse ruled as a dictatorial Thai regent until King Chulalongkorn assumed the reign as Rama V on 16 November 1893. The road intersected New Road, which paralleled the Chao Phaya River. New Road marked one of the first decent all-weather roads built outside the walled city in 1864, a few years after international treaties were signed and foreigners began arriving. Before this period, transportation and commerce was almost solely conducted on numerous waterways crisscrossing the city. To accommodate an increasing number of diplomats and other foreigners, along with several embassy buildings, enlightened monarch King Mongkut ordered a first-class hotel built on New Road. ⁵

Over time, luxury accommodations of the Oriental Hotel became renown in a few novels and for the notables who stayed there. The building stood on the bank of the muddy river that wound around the western side of Bangkok and separated the city from Thonburi. Parts of the hotel reminded me of the movie *Casablanca*. I looked at a couple rooms and found them unspectacular in a modern era. However, as a nice touch, one entered each room through swinging wooden bar type doors. Attempting to visualize and describe the area as it was a hundred years before, the word quaint came to mind. I particularly liked the broad lawn sloping down to the river.

East of the hotel was the area's only movie theater. I opted to walk west and passed many small cottage industries located in shop houses where the occupants worked and lived. The

⁵ Alec Waugh: *Bangkok: The Story of a City* (Boston: Little Brown, 1971) 68, 80.

most interesting was a wooden match factory where smiling youngsters did not seem to mind the hairy "farang" staring at them. Following my extensive walk-about, I slept well that night.

It looked like U.S. Army Special Forces personnel attached to JUSMAAG had caught up on their work, as during the next three days the requirement diminished to a single aircraft. Despite no scheduled missions, we were obligated to board the 0500 hour bus to the airport to stand by in the non-air conditioned terminal until released. Devoid of creature comforts, the boring stand by period took place on a hard-wooden bench in front of the Company office. The only relief from the heat occurred when we were released for meals at the relatively inexpensive air-conditioned restaurant. Money was not a problem, for I cashed a check at Johnson Ma's money changing office and had sufficient walking around baht.

With little diversion and no entertainment, the hours of waiting became very tedious. Except for reading a discarded newspaper, the only break from monotony became people watching. Depending on aircraft arrivals and departures, several times a day passengers entered or exited double glass doors leading to the parking ramp. During these periods friends and relatives mingled in the common area or conversed on church-like pew benches provided for their "comfort." ⁶

To help pass the time, the more affable bus drivers from the transportation department liked to converse and practice English. One young chap, Thawat (the "h" is silent), had trouble

⁶ Author Note: In contrast to telescoping walkways employed in today's modern terminals, yesteryear's passengers were required to board a bus, walk to the plane, and climb portable stairs to the cabin section. During the monsoon season, if lucky, one might be afforded the luxury of an umbrella to remain dry.

pronouncing "th", saying tis instead of this, so I instructed him how to position his tongue to properly sound the consonant. When he still experienced a problem, I recommended that he stick his tongue between his teeth and clamp down. With practice, he found it easy to say this, that, the, and other "th" words. The simple language drill gave me great satisfaction and created a bond between us.

My projected one-week assignment in Bangkok stretched into two. However, as some consolation for the extra time spent away from home, I enjoyed the luxury of unaccustomed hot showers and decent, but not elaborate meals. I discovered that if one was careful the cuisine was not quite as expensive as previously assumed. Still, I could not afford to splurge and had to carefully monitor my nickels.

Former Marine officer Jerry Souders replaced warrior Don Wright. Closer to my age, I found Jerry considerably more friendly and responsive than my previous Captain. Over the next five days, we flew four missions to interesting areas, most suffixed with "Buri." Scattering flights between the east and west, the first one took us to another Special Forces camp at Sara Buri (Sierra-212). The next day found us flying down the western peninsula to the Hua Hin (Sierra-10) resort. The area supported a Thai Special Forces unit and was the site of the Naresuan border police camp. I had no idea of the latter training camp's significance at that time until work resumed in Laos and I met and worked with Thai PARU personnel (see book one-*Genesis*). With the Hua Hin work completed, we journeyed further south to Pran Buri (Later Tango-708). There we met several former White Star Special Forces officers, who, like us, patiently waited for Laos to heat up again and a chance to re-enter the country.

We retained Hotel Alpha, but American and Filipino Flight Mechanics rotated. Abuy, with whom I had spent the cold RON on the raised split-bamboo pallet in the Sam Tong warehouse during the winter of 1962, was the tallest Filipino I ever met.⁷ Carl Gable, an experienced H-34 man hired the previous year from the Bridgeport Sikorsky factory, was perhaps one of the best in the Flight Mechanic group. Actually, all the Flight Mechanics I flew with performed their jobs adequately and I found no fault with any man.

Balancing flights to different areas, we were assigned to fly down the eastern spit of land, one of two peninsulas bracketing the Gulf of Siam, to the Sattahip Naval Base (Sierra-18). We soared over picturesque remote fishing villages and beach areas, one at Pattaya that I had previously visited, to the southern tip of the peninsula. Other than scuba diving training conducted at Sattahip, I observed no other activity. Of course, with no "need to know," we were rarely informed of the real purpose of our daily missions.

Unknown to me, a joint U.S.-Thai amphibious exercise, "Jungle Drum," was about to commence in the area. On 17 January, Mike Marshall ferried a U.S. Marine colonel and his aide from the embassy to Sattahip, and then to a ship for a high-level conference. Onboard, Mike met several West Coast HMM-163 pilots he knew in the service, who were part of a contingent for the operation.⁸

That same day, Jim Spillis, scheduled to fly a MAAG flight with Bob Hitchman, missed the bus trip to the airport. He arrived in the Plaza lobby five minutes before the scheduled

⁷ Flight Mechanic: This title is capitalized out of the utmost respect for the men who crewed our helicopters.

⁸ Mike Marshall Email, 08/02/99.
Mike Marshall January Flight Time Records.

departure time to discover the crews already gone. Later, Hitchman claimed to Udorn management that he had waited until the pick-up time and Spillis did not appear, so he left. However, a fellow employee at the hotel corroborated Jim's story. There were no repercussions for either man. I knew Hitch was headstrong, but I thought it curious and discourteous that he did not attempt to call or have Jim paged.⁹

After a meritorious Sunday off the schedule, we went west, again to Phet Buri (Sierra-33). A short distance past Rat Buri (Sierra-64) where our flight path turned south, a large mountain lay like a sentinel protecting the entrance to the peninsula. Toward the top of the mountain, large caves housing Buddhist statues were visible. Before returning to Bangkok, we conducted a few trips into jungle areas west of Phet Buri.

With my tour in the big city about over, I purchased additional baht from the moneychanger, who cashed our stateside checks after we obtained an approval initial from the Air America office manager. This was the only way to obtain more than the twenty dollars in baht we were limited to at the Udorn Air America club. Spillis replaced me, flying with Souders in Hotel Alpha. Following a flight on the 16th, he was relieved.

I did not fly again until 22 February.

⁹ Jim Spillis Interview, 02/09/97.

Following another day's delay while waiting for transportation, I arrived in Udorn. From people at our facility, I discovered that several interesting events had occurred during my absence. Late on 5 January, consistent with blanket Pathet Lao warnings in Military Region One regarding interference in their de facto territory occupied since May, enemy gunners downed a second American-operated plane. The latest incident occurred while flying a cargo mission similar to the November C-123 event, except that it was not during landing, but while air-dropping supplies to friendly Yao tribesmen. This time the shooting occurred in the hills of northwestern Military Region One, west of Nam Tha and southwest of Moung Sing. It involved an ostensible competitor operating a Bird and Son (B&S) twin engine PV-2 Lockheed Ventura. Established in 1958, staffed at the top level with many former CAT employees, the Bird operation performed identical work to Air America, only on a much smaller scale. Less than four months previously another modified PV-2 had crashed and burned at Phou Fa (VS-16) in Military Region Two while air dropping to Meo forces. In one of his last trips with the Company, helicopter pilot Captain Jim Haver ferried the burned and mangled bodies to Udorn.

According to a *Chicago Daily Tribune* article, with permission of the coalition government, Pilot James W. Fore, copilot "Eddie" Yip, and two Thai kickers were dropping rice to refugees when they were shot down. Peers knew the flamboyant pilot as "Black Bart" for his grand, sweeping entrances into the airfield mess hall dressed in black clothes, black Stetson, and Concho belt.

Fore was quite a character. A young B-17 pilot in World War Two, he was shot down over Europe on his 28th mission and incarcerated in the infamous Buchenwald prison. He also worked in China for General Chennault and Eric Shilling. Later, Dutch Brongersma hired Jim to fly for Bird Air. ¹⁰

After other crewmembers had exited the dying ship, Fore was reputed to have exited a small overhead cockpit hatch, activating his parachute to facilitate the departure. Many later joked that under normal conditions the bulky individual never could have squeezed through the small aperture.

Word of the Ventura crash reached the Bird Wattay Airport office late in the evening. Since B&S possessed no helicopters, sufficient search and rescue (SAR) personnel, or other capability, Dutch Brongersma's assistant, Eric Shilling, requested Air America Vientiane management's help to retrieve their people. Operations Manager Jack Leister coordinated the SAR. Caribou B-851 was preloaded with rescue equipment and Udorn was alerted to send two H-34s and crews to Ban Houei Sai early the following morning. ¹¹

The C-7 Caribou, piloted by Captain Ed Eckholdt, departed Vientiane with a SAR team consisting of Frank Janke, Air Transportation Operations Group (ATOG) Traffic Manager, and Mike LaDue, ATOG Manager in charge of the American Freight Specialists (AFS). After joining with the H-34 pilots at Ban Houei Sai, the two men flew to the area in a helicopter piloted by Captain Billy Pearson. The crashed plane was located within a reasonable time, but Fore was discovered not far away in terrain not suitable for landing.

¹⁰ Description from Jim Fore's book, *Tragedy and Triumph: A Pilot's Life Through War and Peace*.

¹¹ During his military service career, Jack Leister had served in the same Marine squadron as Charlie Weitz.

Inexplicably, the standard issue yellow "Horse Collar" was missing from the aircraft fly-away inventory. After searching, Mike found some rope in the cabin. Forming a loop by tying a surgeon's knot, he created an improvised sling. Pearson's Flight Mechanic, at the risk of strained back muscles, hoisted LaDue and Janke to the ground to recover the PIC. They encountered an enraged Fore who had spent an uncomfortable night warding off attacks by man-eating wild pigs.

Now lighter and making a closer examination of the terrain, Pearson decided he could hover close to the ground just above the elephant grass. While executing this maneuver, Fore, Janke, and LaDue were able to board the ship.

While Pearson and the team were engaged in Fore's rescue, the second H-34 pilot landed in a friendly village and recovered one kicker. "Eddie" Yip, was discovered in another small village where he could understand some of the local language. The villagers took him under their wing and initiated a drunken party.

The second indigenous kicker was difficult to find. After a time, his chute was spotted in a tall tree. The SAR team again were hoisted to the ground and hacked their way through heavy brush to the tree where the kicker lay unconscious and in poor physical condition. They surmised that after parachuting into a tall tree on the side of the rugged slope, while extracting himself from the parachute harness in the dark, he had miscalculated his height above the ground. During the drop and fifty-foot tumble down the incline, he incurred critical neck and back injuries.

The men began hacking a makeshift opening in the elephant grass, but found the work excruciatingly slow and difficult. Suffering overnight from grievous wounds and exposure, after an hour the kicker mercifully expired. The final extraction of the

body and team did not proceed smoothly and encompassed several attempts. Eckholdt radioed that enemy soldiers had been spotted not far from the site.

Before completion of the memorable SAR, hampered by harsh terrain, hazardous conditions, including sporadic ground fire by the encroaching enemy, the crewmembers and team experienced extreme duress.

Finally, as Pearson hovered, the kicker's body was trussed to the rope sling and lifted into the cabin. As LaDue was being hoisted out, Eckholdt again called indicating that Billy was drawing ground fire. Bill immediately pulled pitch and both the helicopter and Mike began ascending. Dangling high in the air with his back feeling negative effects, after reaching door level, Mike was pulled into the cabin by the American Flight Mechanic.

Then it was Janke's turn to depart the slope. To confuse the enemy, Pearson approached from a different direction. The ride up the hoist must have been equally as nerve rattling, for he entered the cabin with a dead white pallor.

All hands returned to Ban Houei Sai, where the burned Fore and kicker, along with Yip and Janke, boarded Eckholdt's Caribou for Vientiane.

As the sun was setting, LaDue loaded the kicker's body into Al Rich's Helio Courier, then collapsed exhausted in the front seat for the long flight to Udorn. Al called ahead and the plane was met by a military vehicle. Many curious people, some military, gathered around the ship and personnel loaded and spirited the body away. Someone mentioned that the body would likely be stored in a commissary freezer until Bird & Son could arrange preparation and delivery to Bangkok where the boy's mother lived.

Since it was too late for a flight to Vientiane, Mike rented a room in town. He ate and drank heavily at the Wolverine Bar until pouring himself into bed. The following day, he caught a ride on an Air America Beaver scheduled to Vientiane.¹²

YAO (IU MIEN) TRIBE

The Fore incident occurred near a remote Yao tribal village. Traceable for hundreds of years and encompassing eleven generations, the dominant Yao clan was headed by hereditary princes, brothers Chao Mai (Jao E Fou Joy) and Chao La (I-Kyen) Srisisongfa. Their ancestors originated in Canton, Kwang Si Province, China, and for various reasons in 1867, the tenth grandfather (Yao Koy Lin) moved to a borderless region north of Moung Sing (later designated Houa Khong-Nam Tha Province). Derived from a wealthy ruling class, the extended family at one time governed tribal people along the Chinese, Burmese, Vietnamese, and Lao borders. In 1887, the King of Moung Nane appointed the brothers' grandfather representative over Nam Tha ethnics living in the Vieng Phou Kha area. This family responsibility continued after the French colonized the country. Before 1927, most of the tribes lived very close to the undefined border, so close that they lived in what eventually became Laos and obtained their water in Yunnan Province.

As Chinese government influence began to expand over hill tribes living along the Lao and Burma borders, the Yao and other tribes reacted. The independent people would not tolerate taxation that included part of their crops and animals. Therefore, a crafty and aggressive Chinese-speaking folk, they

¹² William Leary 1963 Notes with Interviews from LaDue and Janke. Wayne Knight Email 06/03/00. Mike LaDue Emails, 02/21/10, 02/22/10.

eluded and confused both French and Chinese tax collectors for many years by insisting they lived in one country or the other where they paid taxes. Playing one country off against the other, the tax ploy lasted a long time until exposed, and they later agreed to move to Phu Sam Sao, well inside the Lao boundary.

Another reason for those Yao still living close to the border or in Yunnan to move further south, occurred well after the communist takeover of China in the late nineteen forties. Then, with the advent of China's Great Leap Forward experiment starting in 1958, many Yao families living in Muang La left for Laos. Culturally, they could not accept Mao Tse-tung's communist system of every third person spying on, and reporting, on the other two.

Long employed in the Lao, Vietnamese, Chinese, and French governing systems as client intermediaries, border security forces, and tax collectors, the Yao possessed a fair degree of organization and discipline that exceeded that of the Meo.

Tapped as his father's assistant at an early age, Chao Mai's leadership roles eventually led to an Auto Defense Ordinaries (ADO) company commander billet in 1959. Similar to Auto Defense de Choc (ADC) units formed during the French occupation period, the ADO group received weapons and minimum training as home guards to provide village defense. In contrast, ADC troops could be mobilized and utilized anywhere within the province. The extra duties resulted in different government pay scales, sums that were usually in arrears.

As early as 1958, U.S. Agency field personnel at work in the north discovered that Chao Mai and Chao La were considered leaders among the Yao. At that time, Chao Mai held the title of Tasseng, a sub district chief. By 1961, when Pathet Lao influence began to rapidly expand in northwest Military Region

One, the Agency began searching for a tribal leader possessing similar influence with the people on the scale as in Vang Pao's Military Region Two. Chao Mai's name topped the list. Consequently, Bill Lair sent Bill Young, one of the early Padong case officers, to determine if Chao Mai would truly suit the Agency's mold for a regional leader.

Bill interviewed the Yao chief at Nam Tha in December. He discovered that Chao Mai was a veteran in the war against the Japanese, and that government officials considered him the top man among Yao in the province. Furthermore, he paid homage to the Lao King and advocated disdain for communism. He also claimed control over 5,000 Yao, and considerable influence with other regional tribes.

Young, impressed with Chao Mai's bona fides, took him to Vientiane, where Bill Lair promised to supply three hundred-man weapons packs designed for air drop. Because the same danger from Vietnamese encroachment did not exist in the area to the extent as that in Military Region Two, weapons were mostly Springfield rifles and other World War Two equipment. However, political wrangling developed and these arms did not arrive until late April. With the balloon about ready to go up at Nam Tha, training was necessarily limited before the men returned to their villages.

Following Nam Tha's ignominious fall in 1962, and enemy consolidation in the area, Yao were scattered in the hills east and north of Nam Thouei, and south and east of Vieng Phu Kha (Site-135) toward the Nam Tha River. The rest of the area, other than Moung Mounge (Site-93), Ban Houei Sai, and Mekong River villages, was sparsely populated with only a few small hamlets of ten to fifteen houses. Opting for lower elevations, Pathet Lao normally occupied river valleys with few actually living in the hills.

Like the Meo, possessing ample incentive, Yao people hated the communists, their harsh methods, and stifling ideology. In Pathet Lao-controlled areas of Houa Khong and Phong Saly (translated as corn field) Provinces, ostensibly controlled by the enemy since the fifties, there were reports of extortion, arbitrary impressments, and summary executions of Yao village leaders for non-compliance with their demands. Because of this ruthless treatment and total lack of appeal, few hill tribe members opted for the communist faction's way of life. Because lowlanders lived in the same areas as the enemy, and unkind remarks regarding RLG and American motives were taken at face value, PL recruiting was more successful.

Following enemy consolidation at Nam Tha, continued advances, and signing of the Geneva Accords during July 1962, the initial Agency goal regarding the Yao became to preserve the resistance organization and its intelligence gathering capability. Implementation of the Geneva Accords in October restored the theoretical ceasefire line of May 1961 to the communists. Therefore, Chao Mai and 2,000 of his followers, rather than remain in the Pathet Lao area of influence, systematically moved into safer refugee areas at Ban Na Woua (Site-109) and farther south to Nam Thouei (Site-118). Site-109 initially served as the base camp with 1,000 armed Yao, a force that had previously been scattered throughout Nam Tha. Nam Thouei was the preferred refugee site, as it was easier to supply and the more disciplined Yao were not especially compatible with Meo clans. However, before a major refugee relief effort got underway at Ban Houei Sai, much of the medicine and food supplies required came from Sam Tong, with Pop Buell and Doctor Charles Weldon often checking on conditions there.

Younger brother, Chao La, who did not interact well with the more militant Chao Mai, elected to remain in the mountains with his people between Moung Sing and Nam Tha until 1964. Unable to further tolerate the communist harsh methods, during that year they moved south and eventually settled on the Mekong at Ban Nam Keung (LS-150). In time, this site became the civilian site, and further downstream, Ban Nam Nhion (LS-149), the Yao regional military headquarters. ¹³

¹³ Segment Sources:

Joe Flipse Emails, 05/05/97, 05/21/97, 06/03/97, 06/17/97, 06/18/97, 01/24/99.

MacAlan Thompson Email, History and Ancestors of Chao Mai and Chao La, 06/16/97.

Blaine Jensen Letter, 08/20/97.

Ernie Khun Email, 09/14/97.

Thomas Ahern (CIA History Staff), *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos, 1961-1973* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2006) 127-129, 164-165, 201.

Hjorleifur Jonsson, *War's Ontogeny: Militias and Ethnic Boundaries in Laos and Exile* (Article Arizona State University, School of Human Evolution and Social Change) 130-132, 134-135.

Abadie, not normally free with information, provided additional news. He informed me that the proposed dual helicopter USAID Vietnam operation, mentioned toward the end of last year, which would afford Howard and me the only near-term opportunity for Captain upgrading and thus save our jobs, had been canceled. While not exactly certain as to the reason for the cancellation, Ab thought that contract negotiations had broken down in a dispute over a USAID project pay issue for flights into hazardous areas. Beside our not being overly keen on relocating to a new area, the depressing information stung, for nothing seemed to be going our way, and the Captain's billet still remained elusive.

Except for sporadic special situations like crashed Helio Courier recoveries, full-fledged helicopter return to Laos was still not sanctioned, or projected for the immediate future.

A classified USG report was completed at mid-month by recipients of information related by on-scene visitors. Not officially released until later, the report summarized the Laos situation in convoluted Washingtonese as "unstable equilibrium," and that political maneuvering by Pathet Lao and left-wing Neutralist cabinet members was on the increase. Therefore, Ambassador Unger and his country team should take immediate steps to counter this trend and maintain a political balance in Laos.

Cogent points in the report relating to the situation, stated in part:

Domestic support for Souvanna Phouma's coalition government had waned over several months because of the failure to gather domestic political support and the latest defections from Kong Le's military forces to the Pathet Lao. In addition, PL leaders

had verbally attacked the Prime Minister for his relationship with General Phoumi.

State Department analysts believed that Souvanna was the only current leader who could obtain and maintain support of world powers. Critical political and military domestic support was required, and Kong Le's independent control of Neutralist forces and continued presence on the Plain of Jars appeared the immediate answer. Therefore, U.S. support of the tiny general was recommended.

Reports from Kong Le estimated the strength of his Plain of Jars forces at 3,500. Acknowledging Pathet Lao presence there, he stated that they held no strong points. Since 27 November, because of the C-123 downing incident, ideological differences and supply disruptions, Kong Le had severed all remaining association with the Pathet Lao. However, the strained relationship between the parties resulted in sizeable defections from his army.

To reduce defections and consolidate Kong Le's position in central Military Region Two, the report proposed several recommendations:

It was essential to strengthen the security and economy of the Plain of Jars. With construction activity already in progress at Khang Khay (creating a summer capital), development in the region should be encouraged. To help in this endeavor, it was recommended that USAID dispatch personnel to the area when deemed safe. Last was the importance of supplying Neutralists with sufficient military supplies to stave off any Pathet Lao attacks until international pressure from Geneva interceded and the Souvanna Phouma government could train the FAR and Meo to intervene.

The statement indicated that continued and future air supply of Meo forces appeared to be one of most thorny issues

facing USG in the Lao equation. Moreover, there was some doubt in Washington as to the tribe's exact value as a source of intelligence, or even as a positive military factor in the case of a failure of the Geneva Accords.

Supplied by USAID goods through the auspices of Air America airdrops, but without a firm agreement with Souvanna Phouma, the air supply flights would not survive long under the left faction's intense political pressure. Already, because of PL objections, the Prime Minister was waffling on his unspoken acceptance of the flights. ¹

There was also a serious problem with Air America fixed wing pilots' morale, and it was doubtful that they could be encouraged to fly over enemy territory where they could be shot down. Despite no appreciable increase over what they were normally subjected to during the shooting war, the pilots did not believe that they were involved in a real war and were unwilling to accept the risks involved.

Furthermore, because of public knowledge of Air America's past association with the war and CIA, the organization was the most politically unpopular entity in Laos. In addition, both the Prime Minister and General Phoumi had become disaffected with the organization because of arrogant attitudes displayed by Company personnel. Embassy staff believed that any other American air pursuit would be an improvement over the current Air America operation.

Serious thought had to be generated to ensure a new priority arrangement tailored to supply Meo people with food in

¹ A late month memorandum from the U.S. Embassy alluded to arrangements signed the previous October between USG and the Rightists to continue Air America supply activities. Thus far, fourteen planes, flying 1,000 sorties a month, delivered 1,500 tons of cargo under USAID contract.

the future. From the time of the Geneva Accords signing, the Meo relief operation was permitted as a humanitarian and peaceful solution to a portion of the Lao dilemma. Since Lao planes could traverse all points of the country, Souvanna, prompted by Ambassador Unger, inquired if some Air America aircraft could be transferred to the royal Lao government and, under the prime minister's authority, be operated by American crews. The planes, displaying Lao insignia, would be utilized to supply the three factions during the period before military integration. Washington accepted the idea to gradually convert the Air America operation into one partially performed by RLG aircraft.

Even if the plan was implemented, because of rapidly encroaching enemy forces, Meo resupply in the near future might be impossible. Therefore, self-sufficiency and resettlement plans in Xieng Khouang Province were underway at Sam Tong. Still, a conundrum existed of how to utilize Meo talents. Should the U.S. form a stay-behind intelligence capability? In case of total enemy takeover of Military Region Two, what moral obligation did the USG have to relocate the Meo to a safe area?

These and other weighty issues weighed heavily on our military and civilian leaders. ²

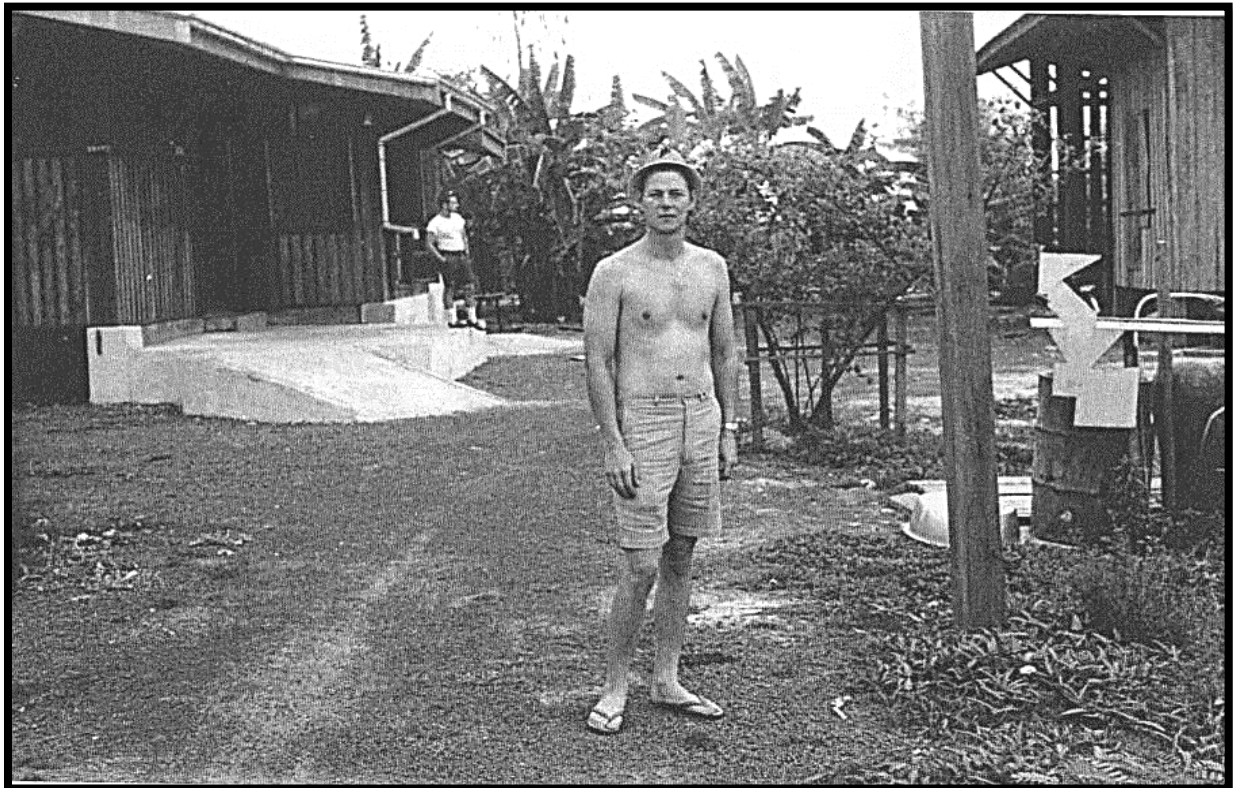
² Edward Keefer and Glenn LaFantasie, eds., *Foreign Relations of the United States: Laos Crisis*, Volume 24 1961-1963 (Washington: GPO, 1994) 440.

The report contains an undated paper prepared by the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Roger Hilsman) and Michael V. Forrestal of the National Security Council Staff, who visited Laos in early January.

A brown paper-wrapped Christmas package, smelling a little bit like home, finally arrived for me through the sluggish APO mail service. However, I had little chance to enjoy it, for on the eighteenth I returned to Bangkok for another "week" working for JUSMAG, and other organizations. It seemed as if scrounging for jobs to keep us busy was really working. On the day of the movement, I flew with Nick Burke and Blackie Mondello conducting a mission for the local United States Information Service (USIS) unit. With U.S. funds, Gordon Murchie, USIS representative in Udorn, was charged with helping to initiate and implement the fledgling northeast Thai rural development program. Tailored to acquaint remote villagers with their true nationality and the presence of a unifying king, the plan also envisioned countering communist subversive activity already rearing its ugly head in the area.

As the sole USG representative in Udorn, the Third MEU's arrival in May 1962 during the Nam Tha crises required Gordon to roust the provincial governor out of bed and inform him of the large Marine unit's imminent influx in the province. He also handled liaison between Marine brass and local officials, and worked to brief the troops regarding Thai culture and orientation.

In addition to, and probably his most important coup, Gordon was instrumental in saving the day for Air America and Thai-American relations following the Ed Subowsty et. al. shooting of King Bhumibol Adulyadej's picture. Considered an ultimate disrespect of the reigning monarch, the desecration had very serious implications between friendly nations, and could have not only curtailed the Air America helicopter program, but



A semi-nude Nick Burke wearing the uniform of the day in front of his family Bungalow. Bill Zeitler standing to rear. The concrete ramp enabled Nick to wheel his motorbike into the house at night for security.

Nick Burke Collection.

also other critical projects throughout the country. Indeed, at first some Thai government officials wanted to imprison or terminate the offenders. When the King learned about the affair, the American Ambassador had to personally apologize to him. Fortunately, Murchie was good friends with the regional police commander and governor, who were able to somewhat moderate the incident, resulting in the bad guys being sent home (except for Jerry Souders).¹

We ferried Gordon an hour south to the large city of Khon Kaen, projected to become the northeast's provincial capital. There he met with and boarded Thai officials, and then directed us to Loei province west of Udorn. The long day ended when we returned the people to Khon Kaen and proceeded to Bangkok. The seven hours flight time we flew that day was an extraordinary achievement for this dry period.

We returned to flying the Buri routine the next day, specifically to Prachinburi well east of Bangkok. After putting the bird to bed late in the day, the ride into town from the airport was equally the chaotic undertaking I envisioned. Despite pilot complaints, the issue of mandatory housing at the high-priced Plaza Hotel still had not been resolved. A somewhat plausible explanation reiterated that we had to be centrally located to fulfill commitments, and that the Company had few vehicles to provide crew movement. This still failed to account for Filipino crewmembers being allowed to find lodging at much cheaper digs.

¹ Gordon Murchie Letter.

PURGES

Sunday was normally a day of rest for the "overworked" JUSMAAG folks, so I pursued another local area cultural walkabout. Upon my return to the Plaza, seven American crew chiefs and other personnel were gathered in the lobby. Curious, I inquired as to their presence. I was shocked when the men casually indicated they had just been terminated, or quit, and were on their way to Taipei headquarters to process out of the organization.

Obviously, the Company was not satisfied to wait for normal attrition, and during the current downscaling a belt-tightening program was underway. With additional Filipinos, who performed the same Flight Mechanic duties at a much-reduced pay scale, filtering into the crew system, Abadie, Moore, and others had judged it a prime time to weed out malcontents, drunks, and additional problem individuals failing to adhere to Air America military style discipline, or had just targeted some folks. The Company retained only a handful of American ground and Flight Mechanics deemed worthy. Among those few surviving the purge were outstanding people: Carl Gable, John Timmons, Louie Jones, Stan Wilson, Gene Lloyd, and Joe Marlin.

Especially targeted for frequent regulation infractions, heavy drinker "Bulldog" Butcher became the first one eliminated. While on STO, he received a message to return to Udorn ASAP. He believed the request related to a pending night shift assignment. Pilots recalled the big man as junkyard dog mean, one who cared little for anything or anyone. He was particularly hard on indigenous individuals mobbing the helicopter. One incident at Pha Khao involved a local attempting to shove his way into the cabin. Incensed, Butcher grabbed and violently shook the individual like a rag doll, breaking his neck. During another confrontation in the Savannakhet area, he sprayed a fire

extinguisher into the faces of panic-stressed troops crowding on the aircraft. This and other equally grating events were duly reported to his superiors by Customers, and entered in his employee file. The crowning blow may have come when Butcher's wife complained to management and promptly left the country after discovering him engaged in canine carnal maneuvers on the living room floor with the maid...²

Another individual the Company shipped out was John Wilson, a real looney-toons type whom I attempted to avoid. One night I was sipping a soft drink in the run-down facility that housed the former Marine snack bar, a bar, and a small dart room. Still dressed in a lead mechanic's white overalls, John entered in a semi-intoxicated state. He was not a very tall person, and perhaps harboring a little man complex, always looked and acted mean. Suddenly, laughing and giggling, he stuck what looked like a .38 caliber pistol under my jaw, and in turn, that of everyone sitting along the bar. I took exception to his action, but strangely, everyone else appeared calm and paid no attention. After he passed, the crewmember sitting next to me said not to worry, as John had pulled this trick on everyone before and all were accustomed to his antics. The "gun" actually was only a very authentic-looking plastic cap pistol Wilson had purchased in either Hong Kong, or Bangkok.

Later, Wayne Knight informed me that another night while in his cups, John was threatening to accost Ben Moore with the toy gun. Ben was still relatively new in the organization at the time. Snapping in and quite inflexible, the former U.S. Navy Captain was busy kicking ass and taking names. Lucky for Wilson

² Jim Spillis Interview, 02/09/97.
CJ Abadie Email.
EW Knight Email, 05/21/00.

those around him persuaded the man to shelve the childish idea. Wayne believed Wilson to be essentially sane, but an extremely angry and hostile person who perceived an evil agenda behind every Company proclamation. In addition, as John was insensitive toward Lao locals, Wayne disliked crewing with him.

Others who departed for Taipei or the States were Bill Wilmot, John Elben, C.P. Wyatt, and electronics technician, John Sterry. C.P. had just returned from the field and was informed that he was going home. After selling his Honda 250 to Wayne Knight, which was pilfered by quemoy's two months later, he caught a C-47 to Bangkok. He spent a week in Hong Kong buying clothes, then left for Dallas. His only reaction to being terminated was disappointment at the loss of the high income.³

Assistant Chief Pilot Jim Coble, in Bangkok to oversee the JUSMAAG contract and shepherd the terminated employees to their destination, pranced nervously around the lobby like a bantam rooster asking everyone if they had seen Charlie Weitz. He obviously was very upset with Charlie, bragging what he would do when he saw him. Well, this smacked of a royal conflict and stimulated everyone's interest. A former football player, the well-built, compact Coble appeared no slouch, but despite the intimidating acting lead pilot's physical presence, Weitz was renowned for his battle prowess.

Someone must have alerted Charlie of Coble's menacing presence. Before long he sauntered down the winding staircase toward his adversary. I looked up in rapt anticipation of a glorious rumble when Weitz shouted, *"Hey Coble, I understand you are looking for me?"* To me, Charlie's sarcastic tone conveyed a precise and meaningful message. He had tossed down the armored knight's mesh gauntlet and was waiting patiently for a response.

³ CP "Stash" Wyatt, Emails, 05/03/07, 05/15/07, 05/26/07.
Wayne Knight Email, 07/15/07.

Predictably, Coble's bravado and perhaps his manhood shriveled. He stammered something, and the potential incident passed before it came to a head. Jim was extremely wise backing off that day, for Charlie was solid like a rock and performed difficult one-armed push-ups. Indeed, in later years he told me that while drinking in a Pittsburgh bar, he one-punched and killed a guy in self-defense. One had to believe this, for although Charlie retold stories, some numerous times, no one ever caught him lying.

The departure of the American crew chiefs fostered a morale busting mood. With thirty-seven pilots on the roster, and management poised to eliminate more troublemakers, it was easy to hypothesize that we H-34 first officers would soon follow the others through the revolving door. Taking a realistic, but paranoid stance, a last in, first out philosophy seemed logical to me.

Like many other pilots, I half believed that Laos would blow up again, prompting USG to intervene in strength and provide work to those who remained in the theater. The only question mark remained Air America's status should U.S. military ground forces actually enter the fray. With all the speculation and wishful thinking prevalent at the time, the nasty interlude failed to foster a sense of loyalty or job security, and caused me continuous worry about day-to-day employment. Fortunately, JUSMAAG work kept me busy, providing a medium in which to submerge my immediate concerns.

As Captains rotated in and out of Bangkok, and First Officers remained, Skip Halsey replaced Burke as my PIC. I half suspected that my job was to direct the new men to outlying sites I had visited, some more than once.

Halsey, formerly a Bell-47 Alaska bush pilot, claimed to some people that he was awarded the Navy Cross medal for

meritorious action during World War Two. In addition to the unsubstantiated claim, others believed Skip's verbiage amounted to more blarney than substance. Regardless of his claims, he was a truly nice person. He, his wife, and teenage son lived in a farang type house on the fringes of Udorn. The pilots liked to joke that the son assumed the exact mannerisms of his father, even to the point of walking like him.

After first receiving Thai government permission, the JUSMAAG folks decided to experiment with improved embarkation-debarkation locations. Normally we were forbidden to over fly or land in the city.

On the 21st, to save time and better facilitate a multi helicopter mission, we retrieved our passengers at Lumpini Park, a large park located off Rama 4 Road. Not a great distance from the Plaza, Lumpini contained a large lake, outdoor concert hall, and kickboxing stadium. After pickup, we made our way north to Lop Buri to work with and familiarize Thai troops--at least they looked like Thai--with the H-34.

We returned to Lumpini late in the afternoon and Skip graciously allowed me to conduct the landing. During January through March, the park became a favorite place for recreational kite flying aficionados, who skillfully maneuvered large male and female kites in feigned battle. Some more serious types attached razor blades to their equipment to sever kite lines.

While attempting a landing close to the stadium, amid the kites and trees, I became distracted, approached high and hot, and managed a poor landing. Embarrassed, I was fully aware of my boo-boo, but even Skip made a negative comment.

ICC

During January, an incident occurred that exemplified total Pathet Lao disregard for any aircraft transiting or landing in

its perceived territory. While flying between Vientiane and Luang Prabang, French pilots, flying distinctively painted white CIC-3, successfully conducted a forced landing following an engine failure. (CIC-3 was originally Air America H-34, Hotel-Z-Bureau Number 148806.) Another CIC crew extracted the pilots and ICC members, but enemy units would not allow a recovery and maintenance crew into the denied area for several weeks. Ultimately reaching the site and ensuring an absence of booby traps, the team discovered severed electrical wire bundles and the helicopter almost ruined. It was eventually recovered and repaired in Udorn. As time passed, like an animal marking its territory, it appeared the enemy was increasingly asserting his presence and influence. To me, the incident was predictable. On occasion, I talked to French pilots at Wattay Airport who readily indicated that their work was highly hazardous. Despite the dazzling white and distinctive color scheme, they were often shot at and hit by ground fire. I realistically knew that such hostile action could have emanated from any civilian or military faction, but kept my mouth shut.

After rotating to Udorn, I discovered more bad news, which was increasingly becoming the watchword of our existence. Abadie advised us First Officers that there were no plans to upgrade us any time soon. He also stated that Lao politicians wanted Air America out of the country, and an airport identification pass was now required to enter the airport facility. At least this time he failed to mention the "T" word.

As if Abadie's bad news was not enough for the day, there were additional problems at the house. Specifically, Deanie Estes increasingly had a difficult time adjusting to Thailand's harsh climate. I was not surprised, for I had read that the tropics produced an adverse effect on some Western ladies monthly cycles. However, the large woman's problems extended far beyond this to ones more psychologically oriented. From the first time she heard the story about our encounter with the bandit, she was petrified of thieves. Furthermore, despite living in one of the nicer houses in Udorn, she always distrusted and disliked the unctuous landlord, Singwa. Our being away much of the time did not help matters. Now the couple alerted Jim and me that they were moving to another location.

I failed to understand what they would accomplish by relocating, for at one time or other thieves plagued almost every American in town. Living with the situation simply was a way of life. Numerous myths abounded regarding the slippery devils, who might enter the bedroom while one slept and kill the occupants should they awake. In such a case we were cautioned to feign sleep. The bad guys were also reputed to possess a special smoke compound that rendered house dwellers unconscious while

they went about their devious tasks. The unsubstantiated tales all seemed very weird to me.

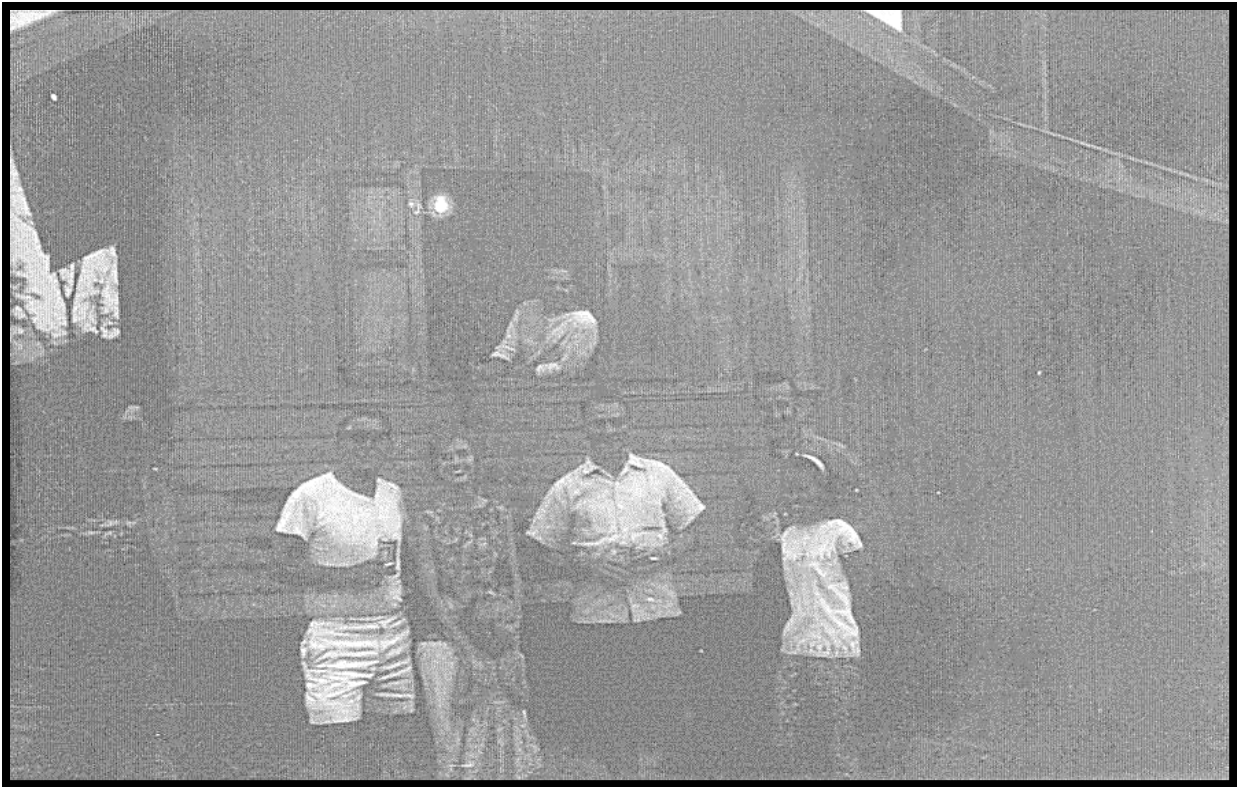
Selfishly, I was very comfortable living in the house, and really did not want to dissolve our extended family. Deanie was an excellent cook, and I adored both Patty and Scottie, who referred to me as Uncle Dick. Still, after realistically analyzing the situation, I concluded that they would never experience a normal life while two men displaying bachelor's appetites were living with them. It was indeed time for us to leave Howard and his family to privacy and their own designs.

Since Jim and I could not singly afford to rent most places, an immediate problem revolved around quickly finding acceptable lodging. Fairy, in town to visit her parents, showed me a few houses, but as they were unappealing to me, and as I was reluctant to play house with her at the time, I rejected both.

SOPA VILLA

At the airfield Captain Jerry McEntee advised me that the house he, Dan "Red" Alston, and Phil Peary lived in was available to rent. In August, Red went back to Florida to marry. He and Jane lived in another house in a multi-house compound along with the Reid and Connor families. Peary, like Alston, a furloughed National Airline pilot was caught up in the Beaver flap and departed Southeast Asia. Jerry, finding himself alone in an area devoid of Americans, desired to move across town and room in Scratch Kanach and Bill Zeitler's four-bedroom house. It was located in the same compound where the Nick Burke family resided.

Fed up with the outrageous rent squeeze, for some time, Air America employees had banded together determined to force



Kanach and Zeitler Bungalow. Left to right: John Sterry, electronics specialist, Patty Burke and daughter, Captains Charlie Weitz, Scratch Kanach and Bill Zeitler's girlfriend "Molly." Bill is hanging out the open window.

Nick Burke Collection March-April 1963.



Nick Burke residence located in same compound as Zeitler and Kanach's Bungalow. The concrete ramp allowed a motorcycle to be wheeled into the house at night for security.

Nick Burke Collection.

unrealistic house prices down. Market demand had previously kept them high. However, since Air America began downsizing, additional housing had become available and, for the first-time rents became negotiable with panicked landlords.

The typical northeastern wooden Thai stilt style house that Jerry previously lived in was located south of the city limits on Soi Wat Po. An offshoot from the main airport road, Tahan Tanon (Soldiers Road), the wide laterite dirt road extended northeast a long distance to Wat Po, an old temple complex where cremations were performed. Appearing like a remnant of past rice paddy land, a section of open ground surrounded the area and, except for a scattering of rude squatter huts, few houses or neighbors were present. With two furnished bedrooms, the house appeared ideal for Jim and me.

A sign written in both Thai and English white letters mounted in relief on green plastic hung from the wooden gate trellis, proudly proclaiming the existence of Sopa Villa. The sign also announced that superintendent of Udorn schools, Thisopa, owned the house. With Fairy's assistance, we dickered over the rent with Marvin, Thisopa's effeminate-looking nephew, also an educator. We eventually negotiated a reasonable fifty dollars per month, about three times less than he desired. As we had split the one hundred fifty dollars rent three ways at the Singwa house, I thought we struck a fair deal. In an unwritten contract, we mutually agreed to assume responsibility for the electric bill, while Thisopa would handle water costs.

Another nephew, "Buddy," fulfilling the role of a live-in houseboy, also came with the package. Previously, he had done the washing and ironing for the original occupants and little else. I supposed the boy would monitor us and protect Thisopa's



Author surveying the local scene from the front porch of the Sopa Villa rental property. Stilt house to left belonged to a neighbor who worked at the fuel farm on the Royal Thai Air Force Base across the main road. Wire fences failed to prevent stray dogs from invading the property.

Spillis Collection circa March 1963.

investment. As one of the major selling points of living in the house, Jerry mentioned that after losing a motor scooter he lent Phil Peary when going on STO, Thisopa gave Buddy a pistol to discourage further pilfering.

According to the story, one night Buddy discharged the gun at someone. Another night, he reputedly dispatched a thief attempting to steal the water system pump located above the lower water tank at the rear of the house.¹ For some time the deceased lay in the place of his extreme punishment for all to see and to discourage future quemoyes. In theory, according to Thai belief, the burglar's spirit (phi) wandered the premises, forever deterring all other potential thieves from bothering the occupants. However, like the early American adage, "the proof was in the pudding."

The house sat on a raised mound of laterite dirt. Built on sturdy wood pilings, the floor soared about seven feet above ground, providing adequate walking space to an ineffective-looking wooden security cage. In accordance with Thai custom, the entire structure was built to produce a maximum cooling effect and to prevent entry of water and reptiles. In front, a ninety-degree offset stair case rose to a covered porch with slatted roll up sun blinds. Outside entrance doors opened to the living room and one bedroom. On the northeast side, steep stairs led directly to a covered runway separating the main house and a screened porch from the kitchen, maid's quarters and bathroom. Attached to a wall was a white sink with a waste pipe plumbed through the flooring that dumped its contents directly on the ground. Beside the sink stood a small white refrigerator with a Sang Fah Electric Company step-up transformer (ten position, 220 volt, 20 ampere, 50-60 cycle) to compensate for the huge nightly

¹ Some believed that using Buddy as a cover, Jerry had actually shot the thief.



Eastern exposure of Sopa Villa. Buddy standing by the rear stairway.
Neighbor's child vying for photographic fame.
Spillis Collection.

power draw down, a fact of life enjoyed by those of us at the extreme end of the power grid.

From the breezeway, before entering the house interior, one passed through a screened porch area with an adjoining room, perhaps built for storage or a maid's quarters. The small living room displayed previous American influence by the segmented faux picture window facing east, overlooking a neighbor's rude hut and a series of low rent one-room stalls several yards down the street. A long pole fan and neon light fixture were mounted on overhead beams in the vaulted spider webbed ceiling. We soon learned to activate the florescent starter unit before dark, well before town residents turned on their lights and the voltage radically plunged to a low level. Rattan couches with vinyl-covered cushions and a green-topped Formica table rounded out the dark room's sparse appointments.

Two bedrooms adjoined the west portion of the house's interior. Mine contained a large wood-lacquered bed with a traditional rock-hard kapok mattress, a vertical hutch with mirrored door, and another green Formica-topped table with folding metal chair. Nothing very impressive, but the dark brown room appeared functional. A white muslin mosquito net adorned the bed. A first for me, the necessity for such protection lay in the house's construction. Everything was built from plentiful hardwood except the tin roof and tiled bathroom. Unlike American houses, there were no inner sheathing to cover the void between exterior clapboards and studs. Probably tight when first installed, the outer boards had shrunk and warped slightly over time, allowing gaps and access to nocturnal insects seeking a human meal, or drawn to the light.

Probably another American innovation, although well off the ground, numerous windows were screened and retrofitted with iron latticed work Quemoy security bars. At night, one closed the



Faux picture window displayed an eastern exposure down Soi Wat Po. A squatter's hut sat on the left and Thai Air America employee Boon's one room rental is situated to the right side of the rudimentary dirt road.

Spillis Collection.

wooden shutters against unwanted entry effectively curtailing any cooling or circulating airflow. The combination of securing the apertures, until the cool season, the stifling heat exacerbated by the mesh net, tended to cause fitful sleep and maximum discomfort, but not as bad as the Marine tent city experience in 1962. Jim liked to joke that when he arose in the morning, he opened the windows and screens to allow the vampire mosquitoes' departure. Green pyrethrum incense coils manufactured from the insecticide properties of chrysanthemum flowers, helped to suppress the insects, but the smoke tended to foul the air.

Since no city water pipes existed to our area, as per our agreement, Thisopa had water trucked to the house. The Sopa Villa system was similar, but differed slightly from Singwa's in that the system employed two 400-gallon metal tanks. The water truck operator offloaded the contents, supposedly derived from the city reservoir, into a lower tank. Then, at our leisure, we pumped the precious liquid through a galvanized pipe to a gravity feed tank on top of the high tower. Given a steady supply of the commodity, the system functioned well, providing sufficient water to supply the sink and fill klong jars installed in the bathroom and back porch. On McEntee's advice, when available at the market, I poured a bottle of Clorox into the lower tank to destroy microbes, then boiled all drinking water. Poured into used whiskey bottles, I deposited the capped bottles in the refrigerator. It was a laborious process, but one considered necessary to ensure good health.

The absence of a shower, or even an ersatz hot water system, required a major adjustment. Hence, a cold dip bath became the norm. A silver bowl floating on top of water in the reddish-brown clay jar provided the manual means for a bath. Similar to Navy showers on fresh water-deprived ships, one

wetted down, soaped up, and then sluiced off. Efficient and conserving, the time-honored method still lacked the luxury of a stream of water pouring over one's body, and was very cold in the winter.

As to other bodily functions, the "squatter," or straddle-type commode perched high on a raised square tiled platform. No water closet existed, obligating one to employ the dip bowl to flush down any waste. The arrangement reminded me of boyhood memories of a toilet referred to as a throne. I did not like the apparatus and made disparaging remarks about it at the Air America compound until Jack Connor advised me to purchase a wooden toilet seat. Placed on top of the throne, the seat was highly functional, a wonderful addition to the whole process, and prevented leg cramps.

Before we departed the original house, I thought Sang La would accompany Howard's family to their new place. However, Deanie did not particularly like Sang La for several reasons: The woman did not clean good enough to suit her, and she didn't appear well and looked a bit tubercular. ² Even more annoying, she often brought her two children with her to work. After her discharge, Fairy lobbied hard for us to hire the poor woman to work at Sopa Villa. This presented little problem for us, for we required a maid and our requirements were not overly demanding. As one of her duties, I did insist that she eliminate the abundant cobwebs lurking in the ceiling, something the Thai rarely considered in their Buddhist-oriented live-and-let-live philosophy. However, the ceiling was high and she could not reach it using conventional methods-i.e. the small rush broom.

² Author Note: Because of a high incidence of tuberculosis in the northeast, Doctor Kao recommended employees, particularly families, obtain chest x-rays of their prospective maids.



An outdoor "one-holed squatter," a preferred and efficient toilet used in the Orient. Except for the basic principle, complete with foot pads, this model was not exactly the same as the more elaborate raised toilet installed at Sopa Villa. Water container and dip instrument is used for flushing and cleansing.

Author Collection.

In order to accomplish the task, Fairy encouraged me to purchase a long bamboo pole with a brush of tightly woven sticks attached to one end. Perplexed at first with the crazy American's "idiotsyncrasies," with Fairy's coaching, she caught on quickly to the American way. Before long, the house actually appeared cleaner--considerably more so than the one we left.

One had to be especially cautious proposing new ideas to a Thai. Although we Americans considered our way the best and most efficient, in the Thai culture it often was not. For centuries, the northeast people lived and performed using many shortcuts and they were usually successful. Still, over time, while trying to instill Western ways in Thai people, I developed a Casterlin philosophy, "The right way; the wrong way; and the Thai way." Much to my surprise, I discovered that in many cases, the Thai way was infinitely superior.

Sang La's adequate work, and a possibility of a more rewarding job with Air America, eventually influenced Buddy to leave. This was fine with us, because he rarely cleaned anything but the floor. When I was working, Jim noted that Buddy and his male friend often crawled under blankets on a cot placed on the breezeway. They remained that way for hours, giggling at each other. Jim rationalized the activity, believing any kind of sex was normal for the Thai--as long as it was sex. ³

As the new Club was opening soon, Rusty Phillips actively solicited English-speaking males to wait on tables or help work landscaping the yard. Buddy, perhaps at Jerry McEntee's recommendation, applied for and was granted a job. After hired, but before the Club opening, he went home to Sakon Nakhon for a short visit. By the time he returned, blood tests conducted as

³ Jim Spillis Interview, 02/09/97.

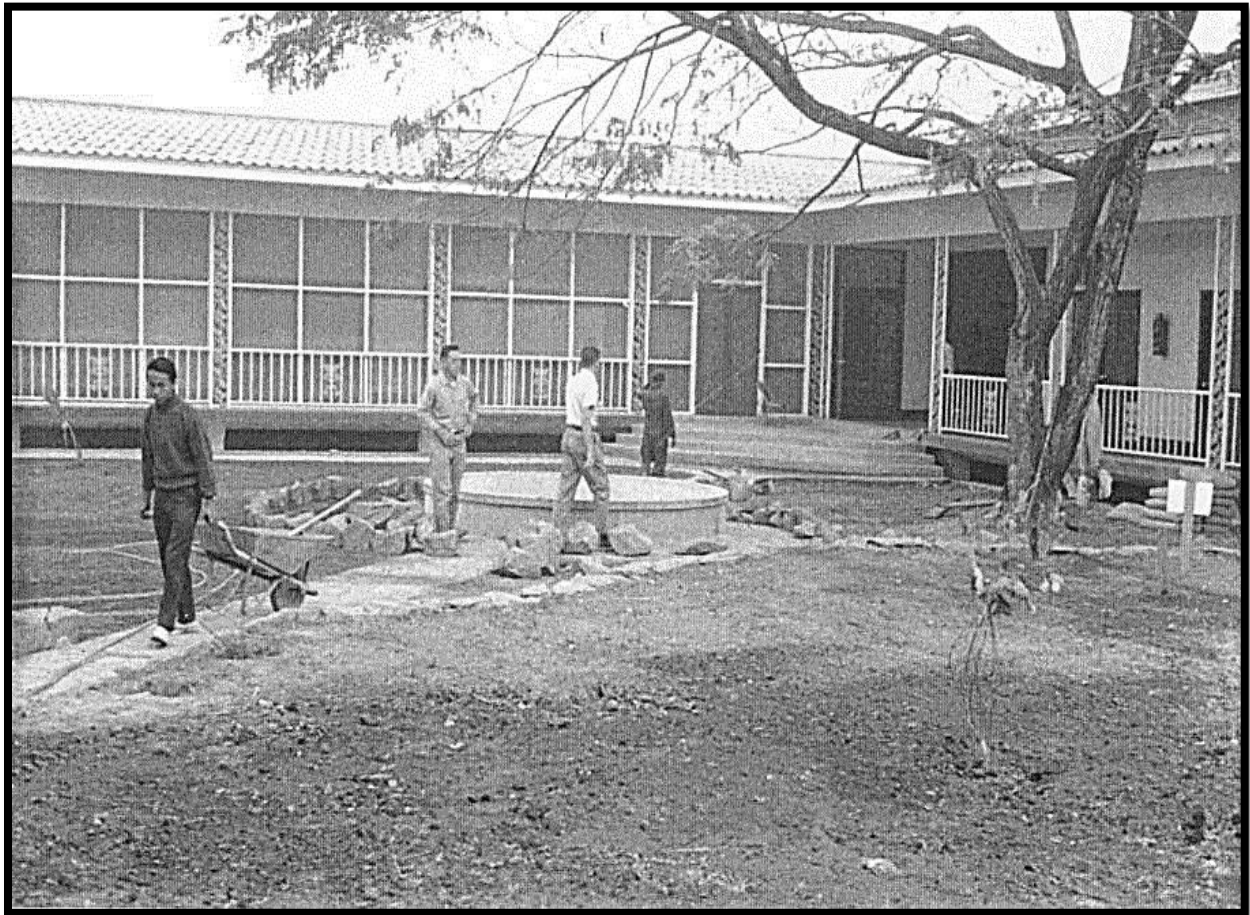
part of a normal hiring routine revealed that the boy harbored a latent syphilis spirochete bacterium, one of the many endemic or congenital diseases plaguing northeast Thailand. A series of penicillin injections eradicated the condition. Soon afterward, Mister Johnson, the "United Nations contractor" we had met the previous year, who ostensibly searched for water in the region, hired Buddy. While learning the drilling trade and interpreting, he was paid an inflated rate of 600 baht per month.

By moving to Sopa Villa, we forfeited several creature comforts that a more western appointed house might have provided. However, I decided that the transition to a more traditional Thai-oriented lifestyle would prove culturally interesting, but certainly require substantial patience and a period of adjustment. At any rate, in our present pilot underling status, and unknown longevity with Air America, we could ill afford to spend what little money we earned on more lavish housing.

Captain Ben Moore, long aware of his charges' sagging morale, in an effort to bolster spirits dangled a projected March Recreation Club opening in front of us. Everyone eagerly anticipated the grand opening. Weary of Alfred's snack bar menu, it meant a huge improvement to a cleaner, attractive air-conditioned restaurant, serving more varied and wholesome food. Under the Madriver contract, funds were allocated for employee recreation. These contractual provisions, plus profits from the snack bar accumulated over time, were instrumental in the Club's construction and all improvements. Each employee had phantom shares allocated for bookkeeping purposes, and there were no out-of-pocket expenses to the shareholder for construction. While Beaver pilots anxiously awaited a final verdict from Taipei management concerning the padding scandal and their ultimate fate, Ben selected one of them, Rusty Phillips, as the first Club manager. Rusty, another furloughed airline pilot, currently monitored landscaping work progress, and anticipated the planting of grass, trees, and flowers. Along with Rusty's appointment, Ben formed a board of governors, selecting pilots Dick Elder and Jack Connor to help run the Club. ¹

Anticipating a trip to Hong Kong, I had been attempting to squirrel away U.S. dollars. Recent rumors indicated that the Udorn check cashing privilege would soon be terminated. Normally, money for cashing checks became available from recreational funds and snack bar profits, which were funneled

¹ Author Note: Rusty also attended Duke University and attained a degree in forestry. Unaware of his educational background at the same university, I learned this in later years while reading his obit.



Our former houseboy Buddy helping landscape the area outside the new "L" shaped Club. Captain Herb Baker to left of fountain. Captain Dick Elder walking toward the Club.

Nick Burke Collection, March-April 1963.

through the Company accounting department and then made available to the employees. Now, because of an increased requirement for construction funds, and most recently a worthless check problem, it appeared that even the meager twenty dollar allowed per transaction was in serious jeopardy. With the increase in employee terminations and voluntary separations, there was a lot of employee check kiting in town with landlords and Indian merchants. This, plus unpaid bills surfacing following an employee's departure, led to many locals congregating on base and bitterly complaining to Ben Moore. Since the Company possessed no control over employee activity outside the compound, Ben could offer nothing other than an apology to the stiffed and highly irate individuals. Payback took a bizarre turn later when Charlie Weitz received a check in the mail from his bank that he had previously destroyed and deposited in a wastebasket while obtaining baht at a local Indian tailor shop. Incredulously, some sneaky devil had pasted the pieces together and processed the reconstructed check through his bank account. Obviously, Charlie was not happy with either the Indians or his bank over the blatant fraud.

On the first and sixth, courtesy of the Army Post Office (APO) mail service, I forwarded letters home regarding pessimism about future job prospects and my longevity with the Company:

"Because of the nature of this job and its unpredictability, I think it wise to pay the 1962 federal tax instead of waiting for the 18-month physical presence tailored for overseas workers. A few optimists believe we will be in business for years, but I am not sure. Since the Vietnam contract affecting Howard and me did not materialize, I am leery about the whole operation.

The old bank account is low as opposed to the thousands I expected to be socking away when I first came over here.

Unfortunately, had I not flunked the CAB commercial pilot examination and hired a month earlier, I most likely would be a Captain now earning \$1050 per month." ²

I continued with comments of what I knew relating to questions concerning Laos and Thailand:

"You are right about us supplying food to those poor souls. They are the Meo tribesmen, a mountain people the Lao government would like to see starve or be eliminated. However, in our minds they are the only Lao who are worth their salt as fighters against the communists. We also carry material to help protect them. The helicopter branch is not supplying anyone in Laos now, for we are not flying into Laos. The airplane drivers in Vientiane are performing all the work. Following the signing of the Accords last year, we attempted to maintain a non-partisan stance by supplying the Neutralist troops and PL on the PDJ, but as you heard, they shot down one of our C-123s in November. Unfortunately, the pilots did not have a chance.

You are also right about border bandits and commies in Thailand. Lately, Thai authorities have conducted mass roundups of suspected communists in the northeast. There are subversives throughout the country, but border areas seem to harbor the most. We work extensively with the border police, sometimes in rough areas, but there is no project pay involved. Even the police will not journey into certain parts of the country. The situation hinted of America's wild west."

² Author Note: During August 1962, Elmer Munsell was the final pilot upgraded to Captain status. In this stage of my life, I always seemed to be too little too late. However, on the other hand, if I had arrived in Taipei earlier, the still healing knee might have disqualified me for the job.

AN IN-HOUSE INSURRECTION

Leftist factions in the Lao government continued doing everything in their power to drum the Air America organization out of the country. Because of the heightened political tensions in Vientiane and condemnation of Air America, we were not welcome there, and trips to the United States Operations Mission (USOM) commissary became increasingly rare. As a result of the haggling, we were required to produce a Lao visa or identification pass to leave and reenter the three-faction guarded airport gate. Since the policy had recently been instituted, we had none of the required permits.³ This affected American employees' ability to obtain relatively inexpensive western food, particularly baby food for the newborn. I could no longer purchase canned whole milk and fruit juices to supplement my Thai diet. Stymied, I turned to the Indian-owned Kangaroo Market in town for western items, despite the fact they were generally marked up three times from the original price. Still, they were available. Although not the same as I was used to, I substituted powdered milk for the canned variety.

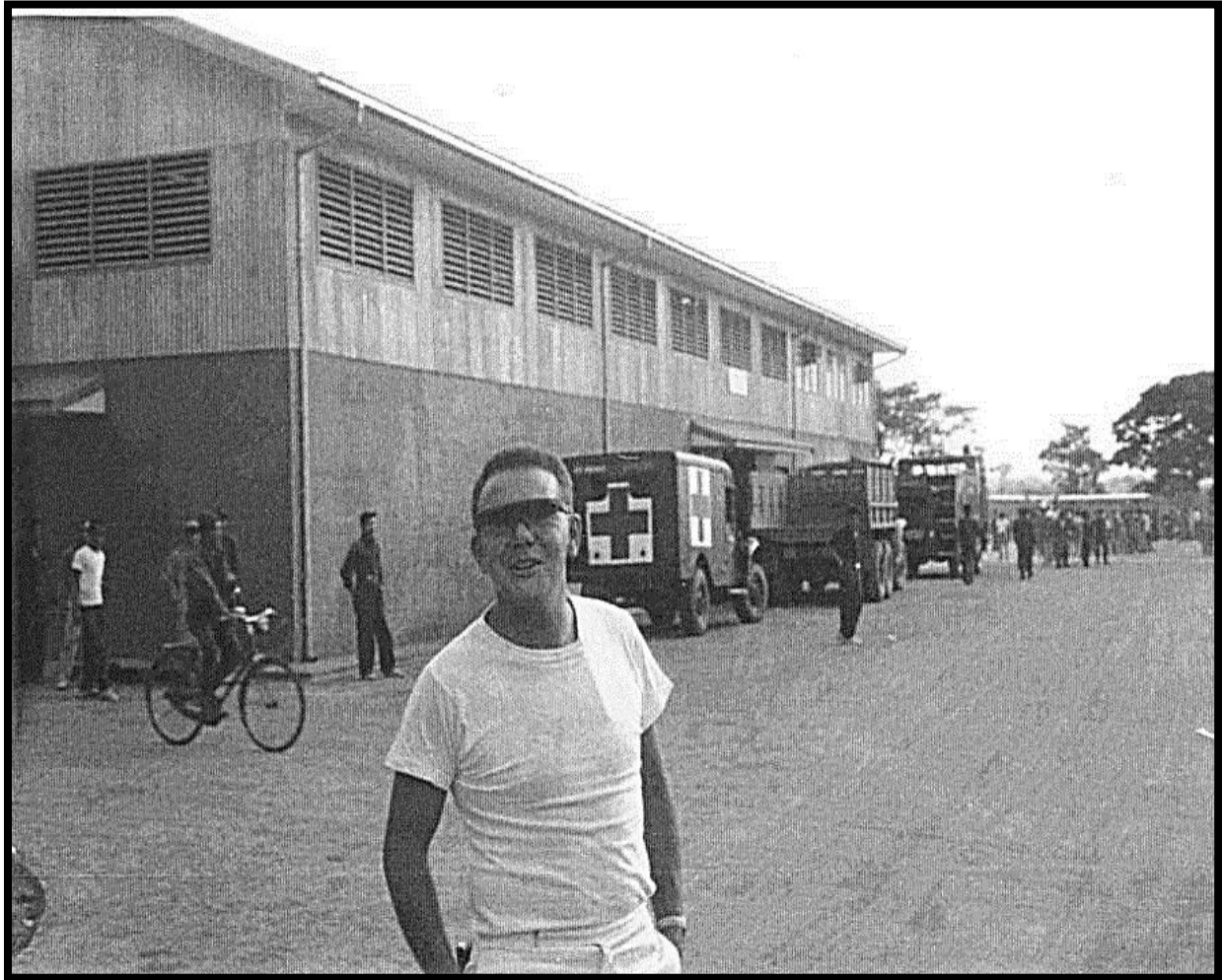
Frustration within the Udorn American community accelerated and came to a head. The combination of little work, questionable job security, few commodities for everyday use, and the onset of the hot season merged on the day of the supermarket riot. At the same time as our access to the few USOM commissary supplies dried up, it became even more difficult to purchase goods at the small, poorly stocked Company sanctioned "supermarket" located in the corner of the old operations building. The small store was entirely dependent on the snail-like embassy supply system. Shipments to Udorn were rare. When the store was stocked with soap powder, Beanie Weenies, Vienna sausage, and other canned

³ Employee passes were very slow in preparation and I did not receive mine until much later, dated 15 July 1963.

goods that were slightly marked up to allow for transportation, and open for business, supplies did not last long. Word of a fresh arrival of goods would produce gigantic turnouts. Wild-eyed dependents waited impatiently in line for a chance to purchase large boxes of laundry soap, cartons of cigarettes, and more expensive items that might or might not be available on the local economy. Invariably, by the time a bachelor received word of a shipment and hustled to the store, shelves were usually bare, and there was scarcely anything left to buy, not even a can of Vienna sausage to take upcountry.

There seemingly was an explanation. The entire Air America supply system was efficiently administered by Filipino employees. This extended to the supermarket: ordering, stocking, and selling coveted items for employee benefit. Current management policy also allowed Filipino families access to the store. Prior knowledge of a grocery shipment prompted Filipino employees in charge of running the store to inform people from their community of the fact. Having the advantage of being the first to learn of a shipment, and with no controls in place, Filipinos were always first in line when the store opened. Ostensibly run to supplement staples available on the local economy, American families, and especially bachelors, rarely had an opportunity to purchase anything other than undesirable items. This unfair advantage caused more than a little discontent among Americans.

Before long, it occurred to us that it was highly unlikely that all purchased items were consumed by Filipino families. A normal Filipino ate rice, not baked beans, hash, or the contents of other canned goods. It was not difficult to speculate as to the ultimate disposition of the goods.



Southwest view of the Air America supply building supervised by "Sandy" Santos. In foreground, John Sterry, electronics technician, and supposedly ASE expert, is wearing the uniform of the day, effecting a "Mister Cool" demeanor.

Nick Burke Collection.

Despite the fact that many Filipino employees made the equivalent of three times what they could earn in their own country, the lack of flying probably sorely pinched the wallets of the lower paid Filipinos, many whose families accompanied them. In order to supplement their lower wages, soon after a shipment, recognizable commissary goods began magically appearing on the shelves of the Kangaroo Market, at vastly marked up prices. Even though circumstantial, the evidence to us was clear. The obvious breach in trust and trafficking in American goods angered many of the more vocal American families, particularly our disgruntled, aggressive, and easily agitated women. Despite the systematic abuse and complaints of this in the system, in the interest of racial and employee harmony, hoping the problem would fade away, local management chose to totally ignore the situation, and did nothing perceptible to diffuse the situation.

Often slow to anger, when Americans are unduly riled, and satisfaction from higher echelon is not forthcoming, they unilaterally act to resolve an issue. Therefore, certain alpha-type pilots, egged on by their wives, conceived a clandestine battle plan of action to make distribution of goods more equitable. When word spread of the next supply shipment, and the supermarket opening was imminent, taller pilots, like "Red" Alston, Jack Connor, Rusty Phillips, and others, as well as taller American women, strategically spaced themselves along the line of mostly shorter Filipino men and women waiting for the store to open. At the appointed time, from the head of the line, egged on by the militant and vocal women, "Red" vigorously began grabbing, jumping, and passing boxes of soap powder and other choice items overhead to Americans gathered in the rear. The line extended well outside the building, and booty continued to

arc high above the heads of the smaller, amazed, and outmaneuvered Filipinos.

I arrived on the scene just prior to the opening. As the comedy unfolded, I mused about the potential for the situation to surge out of control, if not into an outright riot. Not wanting to become involved in such a mess, I stood back as an interested observer. Arms flailed. Laughing and angry voices rose to a crescendo. The rapid, staccato-tic-a-tic of the Philippine Tagalog language was heard as people jockeyed for position to retrieve flying objects. This continued until the store was nearly devoid of coveted items. For a time, the scene looked like a Macy's fire sale, with American ladies getting in the best shots. Had the episode been staged by professional actors, it could not have been more humorous. In fact, I was laughing so hard that I nearly lost a box of soap powder during the scuffle.

Ben Moore, who lived full time on the base, having heard the noise or been alerted to the fracas, arrived wearing his little boy shorts and asked me to brief him about the situation. After attempting to describe what I knew, we watched together until the spent Americans finally went home with hard fought for items, while disgruntled, grumbling Filipinos departed with nothing but pathetic leftovers. Aside from ruffled feelings, no one was physically injured.

It had been a good object lesson in American ingenuity planning, organizing and executing an operation. Most important, a point had been made, and through collective action we had finally won the day. Ensuing action was now in management's hands.

The supermarket was subsequently closed to allow tempers to cool. Soon afterward, Mister Moore officially announced changes to American Commissary ground rules. Abrogating the former third

world policy, Moore indicated that U.S. embassy regulations allowed only American citizens to purchase stateside goods. Of course, this was merely subterfuge. We knew the real reason for the change.

It was some time before Filipino-American relations returned to a semblance of normality, and what they were before the day of reckoning. In hindsight, if a more equitable system with proper checks and balances had been instituted right from the beginning, and had the Filipinos not hogged the majority of scarce, prized goods for personal gain, there might not have been any problem. Still, with many people chasing so few consumables, perhaps the blowup was inevitable.

MAIL CALL

After the Air America mail clerk departed on leave, mail pickups at the Army STARCOM Army post office (APO) became casual and infrequent. One of the first things our drill instructor handlers had taught us about leadership in training centered on not obstructing or withholding a man's pay, mail, or liberty. Therefore, with all the current morale factors affecting the Air America group, we could ill afford to receive our mail in an untimely fashion. Upset, Spillis took the initiative and raised hell in the CPH office. Coble, with whom Jim rarely agreed, and believed to be a cocky sierra, sarcastically challenged, "*Why don't you become a temporary mail orderly?*" Calling his adversary's bluff, for a time Jim picked up the mail at the APO every morning. In the process, Jim noted that Dan Gardner received more than his share. ⁴

A consistent flow of mail to employees continued to be a problem in the early days. Not long after Spillis' duty ended,

⁴ Jim Spillis Interview, 02/09/97.

Mike Marshall had a run in with Ben Moore concerning mail retrieval at STARCOM. Ben invited Mike to retrieve the mail, but he refused stating he was a pilot, not a mailman. Mike mouthed the wrong thing at the wrong time to the former Navy Captain, and was nearly terminated. Therefore, Mike quietly became our mailman for a time. ⁵

ARGOSY

Dan Gardner stopped by the house one afternoon on his motor scooter. He was distributing an article he had culled, typed, and mimeographed from the February issue of *Argosy Magazine*, one of the more widely read men's pulp publications of the era. ⁶

Titled *The Flying Phantoms of Laos*, the article dealt with supposed origins, history, and anecdotes relating to the Civil Air Transport and Air America organizations. Relatively naïve regarding the Company or its connections, I had previously heard the words CIA and 'soldiers of fortune' occasionally mentioned, but had little idea of what they meant. Thus far, I had worked briefly for USAID in Laos, Special Forces types, and the Thai Border Police, but with all the U.S. government (USG) agencies involved in the Theater, it was impossible to align them all in perspective. Now, for the first time, although toned down considerably before publication, Arturo F. Gonzales, a Hong Kong-based journalist, had written an article purportedly clearing up some questions about the Company. Indeed, the article was expected to have appeared in print eight months

⁵ Mike Marshall Email, 09/06/99.

⁶ Author Note: Mainly because good looking girls were involved in the process, I had performed some writing and mimeographing for our Presbyterian Church youth group newspaper. Copy paper at the time was flimsy, the blue ink smelly, messy, and not easy to use.

earlier, but USG censors had reputedly deemed it too revealing and required a re-edit.

Including the delay, the expose discussed Company operations up to August 1962. Full of colorful stories, sensationalism, a liberal dash of supposition, more than a bit of writer's license, and written sometime after the signing of the Geneva Accords, it read as if the Lao war was over for good. The portion regarding helicopters and the pilots was hilarious, loaded with facts and frothy fabrication. It appeared to me that Gonzales must have conversed with our people in either Hong Kong or Vientiane while they were in their cups, and they had decided to spin a yarn. I considered the description of the H-34 being a "low flying, slow flying, one rotor, one motor, people plucker" a bit too colorful. However, it had a definite ring to it and smacked of the *Purple People Eater* song.

One aspect in the story dealt with unspecified crewmembers tearing sarongs off young lovelies' bodies to see if they wore panties. I had never heard of anyone doing that before and considered it an interesting, if not unique pastime in the history of interpersonal Western-Asian relationships. If branding us animals was already a public perception, then why not put it to practice? Therefore, during Jim and my next visit to the Jute Box, we implemented a premeditated, but modified form of Project Sarong. First, we surreptitiously positioned ourselves strategically on both sides of "Boog," a pleasant, compliant maiden recently arrived in Udorn from some northeast village to earn her fortune. Then, on a pre-arranged signal, we grasped, upended, and vigorously shook the surprised girl. ⁷

⁷ Author Note: Our group jealously guarded Jute Box girls, passing them around among the Air America family. We harbored a misguided notion that by using this method we would collectively avoid venereal disease.

Initially terrified by us laughing idiots, Boog eventually realized that our action was all in fun and we meant her no harm. Sated, after determining that the civilized girl indeed wore panties, we restored her to a normal human posture and rewarded her with Thai currency. We left the establishment content we had just upheld the appropriate image of an Air America pilot as portrayed in the *Phantom* article.

If even half credible, Gonzales went a long way toward explaining what I was supposed to be doing in Laos, and the reason for my presence in Southeast Asia. He certainly provided considerably more information on the subject than any briefing I had ever received. Without reservation, I believed the article would provide perfect required reading for new hires. Overall, *The Flying Phantoms* tended to restore our equilibrium at a critical time when we sorely needed uplifting and there were many laughs discussing it while sipping coffee. Actually, the article portrayed us as unique individuals, a truism upheld over time. It also temporarily fostered group pride and enabled us to once again inflate our chests.

Although not exactly opening the floodgates to the public involving publicity and the inner workings of our operations, the *Argosy* article soon stimulated another short article in another publication:

"An offspring of CAT, however, is an outfit called Air America operating out of Vientiane, Laos...

The pay gets as high as \$2,000 a month but the risks are great. Through at least two years of the dirty Lao war, the Air America pilots flew planes and helicopters over Communist territory. They were shot at daily...

Air America was the subject of a recent magazine article-one of the few published detailed reports on the hush-hush aerial privateers. While anyone in Asia who cares can find out

some things about the outfit, few can find out exactly where it operates.

The pilots are easy to spot: they carry a lot of money and seem to do their best to spend it as quickly as possible. They are very noisy in most things but very, very quiet about their own operations.

They are known to fly actual combat missions. Air America helicopter pilots hauled government troops all over the Plaine de Jarres in north-central Laos to take cracks at the Pathet Lao rebels.

The free-wheeling pilots apparently have the approval of the U.S. government--none of them has lost his passport or been thrown out of the country..

The Reds have been enraged by the civilians flying for the Laos government, and branded all of them as 'war criminals.' They can expect little consideration if they are shot down and captured.

Meanwhile, they keep flying for the CIA, the government of Laos, the love of flying, the interesting assignments--and the money." ⁸

⁸ Scott Stone, Advertiser Military Editor, *Military Beat, Air Freebooters Risk Necks for Love-and for Money*, 02/23/63.

Following an extended interval of no flying, Nick Burke and I began working closely with USIS representative Gordon Murchie on Thai government rural development projects, encompassing impoverished areas northeast of Udorn and into Loei Province.

THAI COMMUNIST MOVEMENT

Southeast Asian governments, with leaders derived from the elite class or by military coup, generally ruled coastal areas where the political economic centers and capital cities were situated. Nowhere was infrastructure neglect more prevalent than in northeast Thailand (Isan), where, before the early 1960s, government leaders traditionally disregarded and provided little effort to improve living conditions of upcountry people. Nor did they encourage them to merge into the greater Thai nation. Consequently, this long, blatant neglect fostered a receptive audience and breeding ground for communist subversive propaganda.

An underground Thai communist ¹ movement dated to the late 1920s, when Ho Chi Minh briefly lived in the outskirts of Udorn and other parts of Thailand. However, until later, the group had little impact on the country. Unable to generate a sizable indigenous following, leaders of the movement sought to appeal to ethnic minorities--the Chinese, Malay, and Vietnamese. In December 1942, the small ethnically divided groups operating within their respective areas merged under a single organization controlled by Chinese leaders--the communist Party of Thailand (CPT).

¹ Author Note: Except for the first word in a sentence, communist will never be capitalized in any of my works.



House or area on the eastern outskirts of Udorn where Ho Chi Minh reputedly resided in the late twenties while drumming up support for his communist movement.

Author Collection.

After the Thai parliament rescinded the anti-communist act of 1933, the communist party Thailand emerged as a viable political party. However, the party was again outlawed in 1946. Despite restrictions, the CPT continued clandestine activity in Chinese schools, associations, and among villagers in some border areas. After Marshall Sarit assumed power in 1958 and communist activities in Laos and Vietnam began affecting Thailand, he declared martial law and increased anti-communist purges.

Many communist guerrillas, of ethnic Chinese origin, were recruited and located in the dense jungle area north of Malaya in southern Thai provinces. These remnants remained from the Malayan insurrection that supposedly terminated in 1960, but actually continued to plague the Thai-Malay border for years afterward. Thousands of Vietnamese refugees, displaced from the 1946-54 Franco-Viet Minh Indochina War, concentrated and settled in the hard-scrabble northeast. Thai government leaders considered many of these people loyal to and adherents of the Vietnamese communist cause.

Others within the country referred to the people of the dominant Thai-speaking group living in the northeast region as Thai Isan. Hosting a constant flow of Lao people across the uncontrolled Mekong River, the large area extended from the Korat Plateau across the border into Laos. The people were distinguished from central Thai by a preference for glutinous rice, a bastardized Lao language, a distinctive script, and a regional style of music, drama, and religious architecture.

For various reasons, communist ideology appealed to some people living in the northeast region. Taking advantage of the porous border and common unrest, communist agitators assumed the guise of peddlers, river boatmen, minstrels, monks, and other clever deceptions calculated to influence and confuse uneducated

folk. They promised an improved future in return for villager support in a major region historically neglected by the Bangkok government. When queried by government officials, some villagers later alleged that they had nothing to lose, living in an area that included the poorest region within a country of plenty. Communists also attempted to exploit antigovernment leftist sentiment, which for decades had been the center of political dissidence and where gangs of vicious bandits constantly preyed on and terrorized local residents. In addition, communists targeted separatist sympathies derived from ethnic, cultural, and political origins. When he was executed in 1961, Krong Chandawong had, by means of Pathet Lao support, represented the leading communist in the northeast. Until his death, he was purported to be the ringleader of an international conspiracy to create an autonomous area consisting of fifteen Thai provinces.

Despite countrywide efforts over the years, communists were relatively ineffective in gaining significant popular support throughout Thailand. A long history of independence from foreign rule, difficulty presenting the communist movement as an anti-colonial, nationalist cause, the absence of great poverty, identification with ethnic Chinese, and the illegal CPT all tended to thwart major communist inroads in Thailand. A strong sense of national identity, common language, influence of a beloved King, and a cohesive Buddhist faith also frustrated the spread of communism.

Because of countering forces, as early as 1959, China and North Vietnam began providing Thai surrogates with training, financial and material support for insurgency, subversion, and terrorism. Training camps were erected south of Hanoi, in the Pathet Lao-controlled areas of Laos, and in China's Yunnan Province. In early 1962, the Voice of the People of Thailand

began broadcasting propaganda from Yunnan. Radio Peking and Radio Hanoi also beamed party line programs in Thai.^{2 3}

With reports of bandits and communists abounding in the northeast, CIA supported border police work. This included emphasis on building and staffing Sayaboury Province border outposts. Located in rough areas along the border, they served as listening posts and interdiction points of trails leading into Thailand. Because BPP was not equipped to provide air supply to remote outposts, Air America Helio Couriers, helicopters, and cargo plane assets were pressed into service.

By 1962, tangible evidence of increased infiltration and propaganda activity illustrated that communist operatives were building and enhancing a support structure among northeastern Thai people, especially those living adjacent to Laos. Therefore, the RTG began implementing long overdue socioeconomic reforms and measures to improve villagers' living conditions and village defense. Consequently, coupled with the police program, Mobile Information Teams (MIT), supported by USAID, followed police units into northeastern areas declared "safe." With advice and assistance of USIS personnel, the Ministry of Interior first organized and introduced MIT teams into vulnerable areas in February 1962. Through close contact with the people, the concept envisioned establishing an awareness of a central government in Bangkok, and creating a positive image of a unified Thailand among the isolated population. The mission tasked the MIT to identify villager problems and needs, and to establish improved communication between locals and regional

² Author Note: My future wife recalled hearing the voice of a grade school girlfriend originally from Sakon Nakhon broadcasting on Radio Hanoi.

³ *Highland Peoples of Southeast Asia*, 31 March 1970, 8; John Henderson, et al., *Area Handbook for Thailand* (Washington: GPO, 1970) 204-205.

authorities. The plan also favored stimulating self-help programs and addressed health, educational, and economic wellbeing by providing sufficient advice, materials, and tools.⁴

Following the initial MIT phase, to help promote better coordination and consolidate separate programs previously subject to abrasive bureaucratic turf battles, Mobile Development Units (MDU) evolved. These units integrated civil, police, and military resources under a single command structure directed by Colonel Tienchai Sirisumpan.⁵

Gordon Murchie served as USIS advisor for MDU-2 Team 1.⁶

Having already flown Gordon once before, we felt at ease with him and easily formed a lasting rapport with the tall, slender man. Very friendly, chatty, and obviously highly intelligent, he possessed a knack of keeping us comfortable and interested in the projects by explaining many rural development details to us. His attitude was quite refreshing in contrast to what I had experienced on previous Thailand flights where no information was forthcoming. One morning he surprised both of us with an astute observation. Displaying more than a layman's casual knowledge of helicopter operations, he referred to an essential requirement for pilot coordination: "Helicopter pilots using all their appendages to fly the machine."

On the seventh, with Filipino Reyes crewing in the cabin section, we journeyed seventy miles west to Loei Province, a transitional land bridge between northeast and north Thailand.

⁴ Area Handbook 206.

Godley.

Lee Huff, *Thailand: Thai Mobile Development Unit Program*, 439.

⁵ Lee Huff, 434.

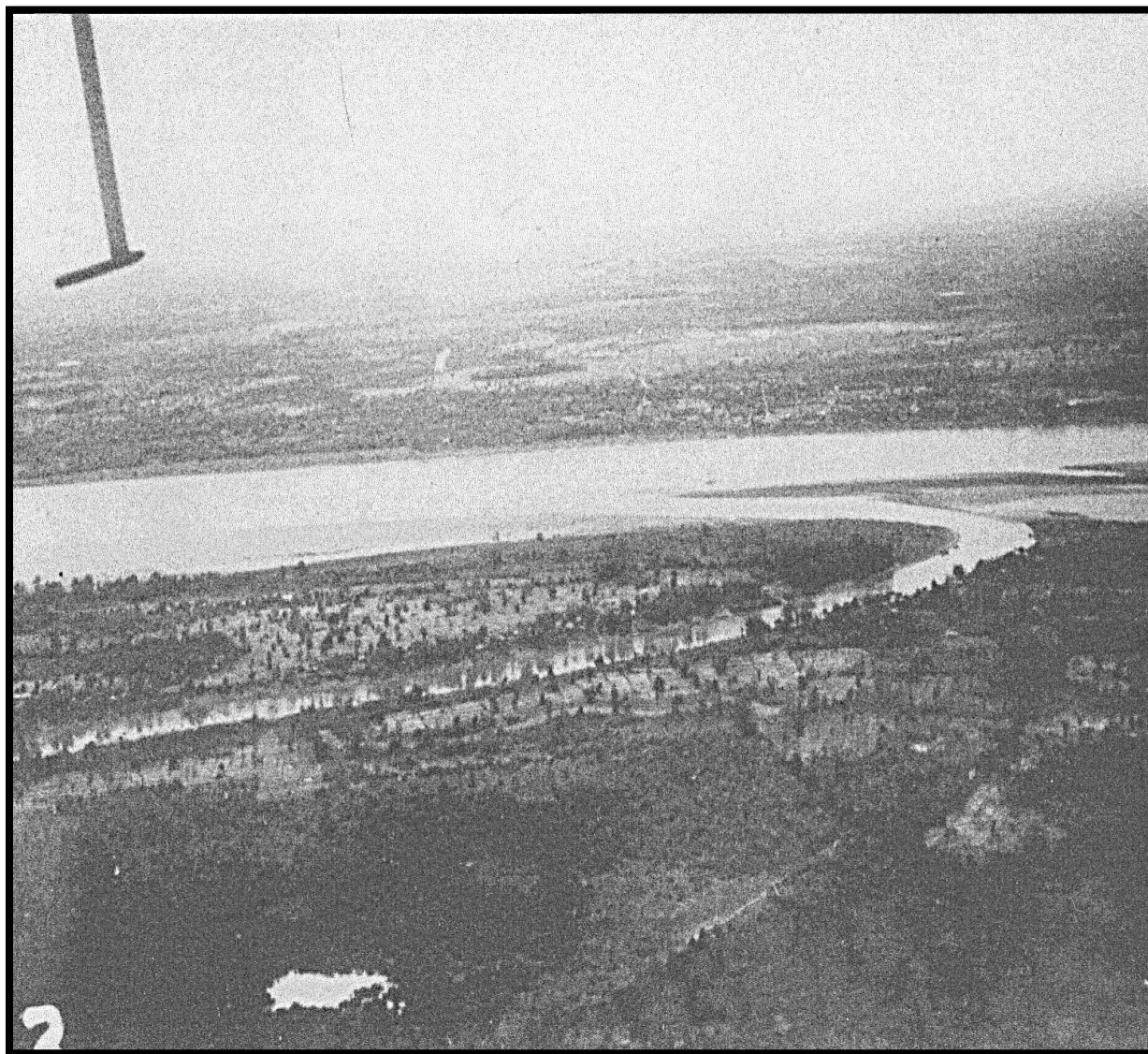
⁶ Gordon Murchie March 1995 Phone Interview.

Largely consisting of high hills, mountain topography, and valleys, the area exhibited a wintry and foggy climate during much of the cool season. As the program had just begun in the region, we did not fly much that day, while respective groups parlayed, organized, and planned future trips to outlying villages. Drummed fuel was available should we require it. I noted local roads were either non-existent, or in horrible condition and largely impassable by vehicular traffic in the rainy season. Bulldozer work on one laterite road under construction to the north of Loei town (Sierra-17) appeared stalled at the outskirts, apparently from the lack of fuel.

The following day, while Gordon planned a future trip with Thai counterparts, Nick, Abuy, and I flew a military man one hundred miles east to the town of That Phanom (Sierra-419) on the Mekong River between Nakhon Phanom (Sierra-50) and Mukdahan (Sierra-417). Having spent a couple of days in the flat region performing a road recon while my HMM-261 Marine Corps squadron was based at the Udorn Airport, I recognized some of the terrain and recalled many landmarks. The banks of the Mekong River were as close to Laos as we ventured that day.

Early in the morning, Murchie and his entourage that included a monk, policeman, government public relations representative, and our crew, departed for Loei.⁷ This time we carried the program's administrator, Colonel Tienchai, a brilliant psychological warfare officer. Commanding officer of the Thai Special Forces Special Warfare Center at Lop Buri, Tienchai was previously tapped as a logical choice to honcho the government counterinsurgency unit.

⁷ Gordon Murchie Letter. The monk later left the priesthood, married an American woman, and went to the U.S. Later divorced, he returned to live in the Loei area.



Located twenty-two miles north of Savannakhet flat terrain at the confluence of the Se Bang Fai and Mekong River in Military Region Three central Laos, the Thai town of That Phanom is located on the river bank directly across the Mekong. Part of the flood plain, the area is often inundated during the annual monsoon season.

Author Collection.

According to Agency operative Bill Lair, for years in charge of AB-1 Udorn, after working early at Lop Buri for two years, Bill subsequently left for Hua Hin, and the Lop Buri camp reverted to Thai Army control. Army instructors initially produced and supported an airborne battalion at the site. At the time when U.S. Special Forces was forming, Tienchai attended Army Ranger School at Fort Benning, Georgia. Highly impressed with the new concept, upon return to Thailand, he persuaded Marshall Sarit to create a Thai counterpart to the American system. He recommended that Thai Special Forces units be constructed from existing airborne troops, commonly known as the Ranger Battalion. Eventually advancing to general rank, he remained in this line of work almost his entire career.^{8 9}

Following a cordial introduction that included a firm handshake, not the traditional wai, I instantly liked the tall, handsome colonel. Enhancing his charm, without being condescending, he conversed with us in flawless English. Surprised, I also believed that Burke liked and respected both Murchie and Tienchai. Unlike Nick's previous cynical and sarcastic attitude for the duration of our USAID work at Pakse last fall, he was probably impressed and truly interested in the work the men were engaged in. If so, he kept his thoughts to himself, while displaying his best behavior throughout all our MDU trips.

⁸ William Lair Interview. Following his retirement and a stint as Thai Ambassador to Indonesia, Tienchai entered the political arena. Murchie predicted the Colonel would receive the status of Prime Minister someday. He never achieved this exalted rank, but headed a small political party. He was eventually elected Deputy Prime Minister and served in the RTG under at least two Prime Ministers.

⁹ Shelby Stanton, *Green Berets at War: U.S. Army Special Forces in Southeast Asia 1956-1975* (Novato CA: Presido, 1985, 10).

Loei town was used as a logistical and administrative focal point for outlying missions. After boarding the district leader, his entourage, and our normal complement, we launched north for Chiang Khan--Sierra-411, and later Tango-411 when the numbering system was instituted--a river town adjacent to lower Sayaboury Province, Laos. It was easy to understand Royal Thai Government security concern in this area. Remote, presenting virtually unrestricted border crossings, and lacking government radio capability, or television broadcast coverage, the region afforded fertile ground for external subversive propagandists.

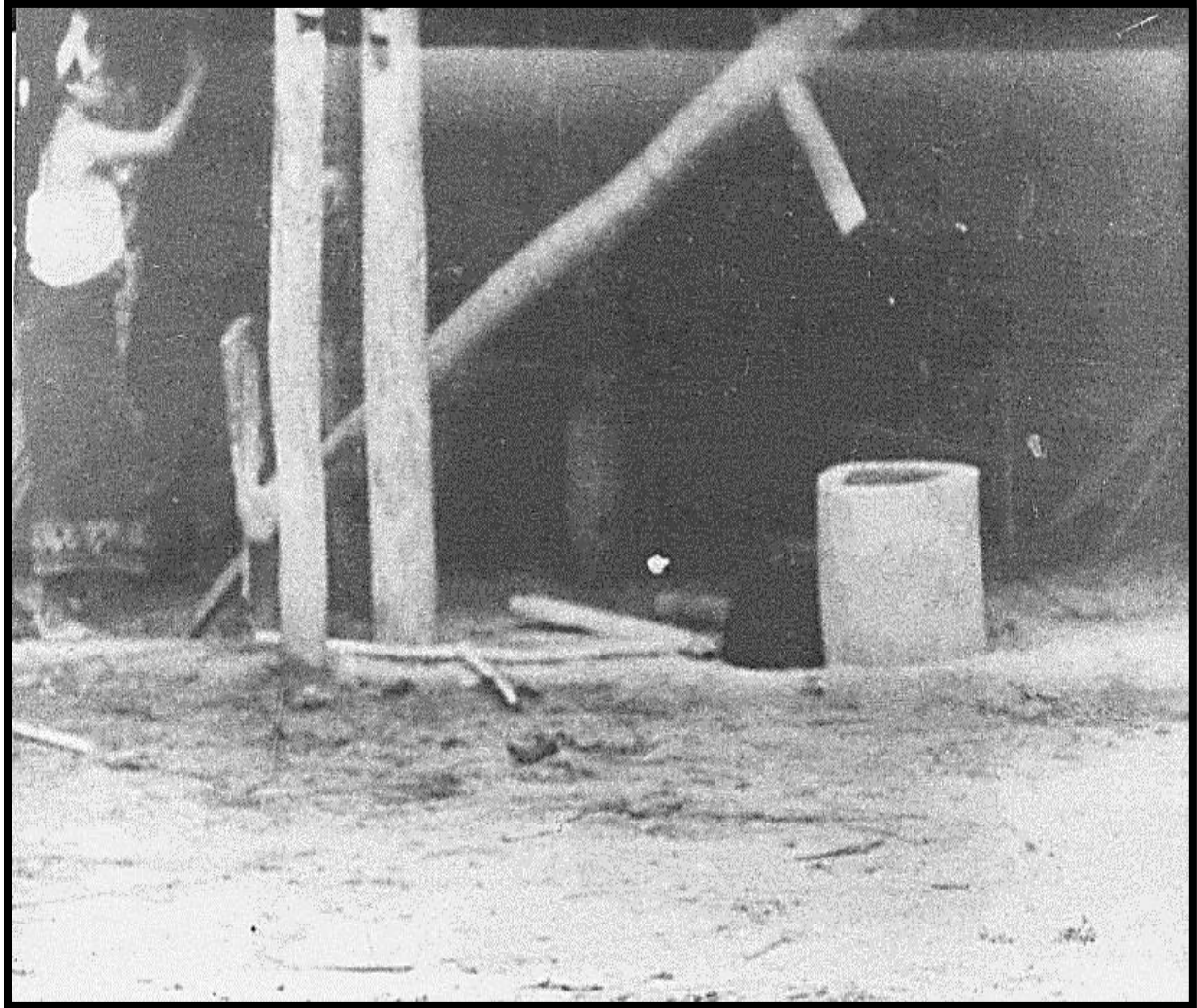
Following the MDU group's conversations with local officials, and observations, we returned to Muang Loei. When Flight Mechanic Maglanoc finished refueling our helicopter, we Jeeped up a low hill and arrived on the flat, jungle mountaintop of Puk A Dun. There we enjoyed a leisurely late lunch in an open-sided thatched roof restaurant. At a long table suitable to accommodate the many government and local province officials present, Tienchai ordered meat, vegetables, and rice courses for all hands. Recognizing that we "farangs" might have issues consuming the fiery ethnic dishes, he ordered canned abalone, a sea food delicacy I enjoyed with white rice. Eventually sated with good food, it was time to settle the bill. I wanted to contribute my fair share, but Gordon quietly advised me that the good colonel would attend to this. He was merely displaying customary Thai hospitality. In addition, the government provided him a generous expense account, which adequately covered expenses for the large group. Not wanting to offend our esteemed host or upset sensitive Thai cultural mores, although feeling uncomfortable, I maintained silence as he produced a large wad of baht and handed it to the shop owner.

The Flight Operations Department scheduled a different aircraft every day. This time, Joe Marlin, one of the friendlier

American Flight Mechanics who had survived the earlier purge, crewed with us. We flew to Pak Cham and then returned to Chiang Khan. Pak Cham, also on the Mekong, was located between Si Chiang Mai (Sierra-406) and Chiang Khan, both well northwest of the terminal railroad point at Nong Khai (Sierra-22).

After covering major river sites, we commenced trips to isolated villages only accessible by helicopter. Some of these villages, like San Gao, were quite remote. Inhabitants generally only glimpsed a fresh face once a year when an ambitious trader wandered by after hiking over difficult trails or paddling along waterways. The hardy traveler bartered scarce consumables such as salt and sugar for whatever he could obtain in kind. Like the majority of northeastern residents, modern history dictated that the people originated mostly from Lao roots. To a foreign observer, the people of San Gao appeared entirely self-sufficient. Like their ancestors, they cultivated corn and rice and raised their own animals for meat. Women processed rice and corn using a time-honored foot operated wooden mortar and pestle apparatus. Similar to America two hundred years before, located under the raised stilt houses young women busily spun homegrown cotton into cloth on well-worn handlooms. Appearing well fed and healthy, they lived quite well in this environment without the oozing sores or other disabilities of people I had observed in Luzon, Philippine Island Nigero villages.

One purpose of the trips was calculated to inform, convince, and instill a sense of national unity in the people. Specifically, that they lived in the large country of Thailand and were considered Thai, not Lao citizens. Most important, the legal seat of government lay in the Bangkok metropolis where a venerated king and queen resided. Over the past year, MIT and MDU team members were aghast to learn that, because of previous government neglect, if a picture of the Thai king was even



A rudimentary, but effective grain processing apparatus commonly used in self-sufficient Southeast Asian villages, displaying centuries old mechanical advantage. Rice was pounded by stepping on the pole and letting it gravity drop into the hollow wooden container to remove husks. The rice was then winnowed to separate the rice from the chaff.

Author Collection.

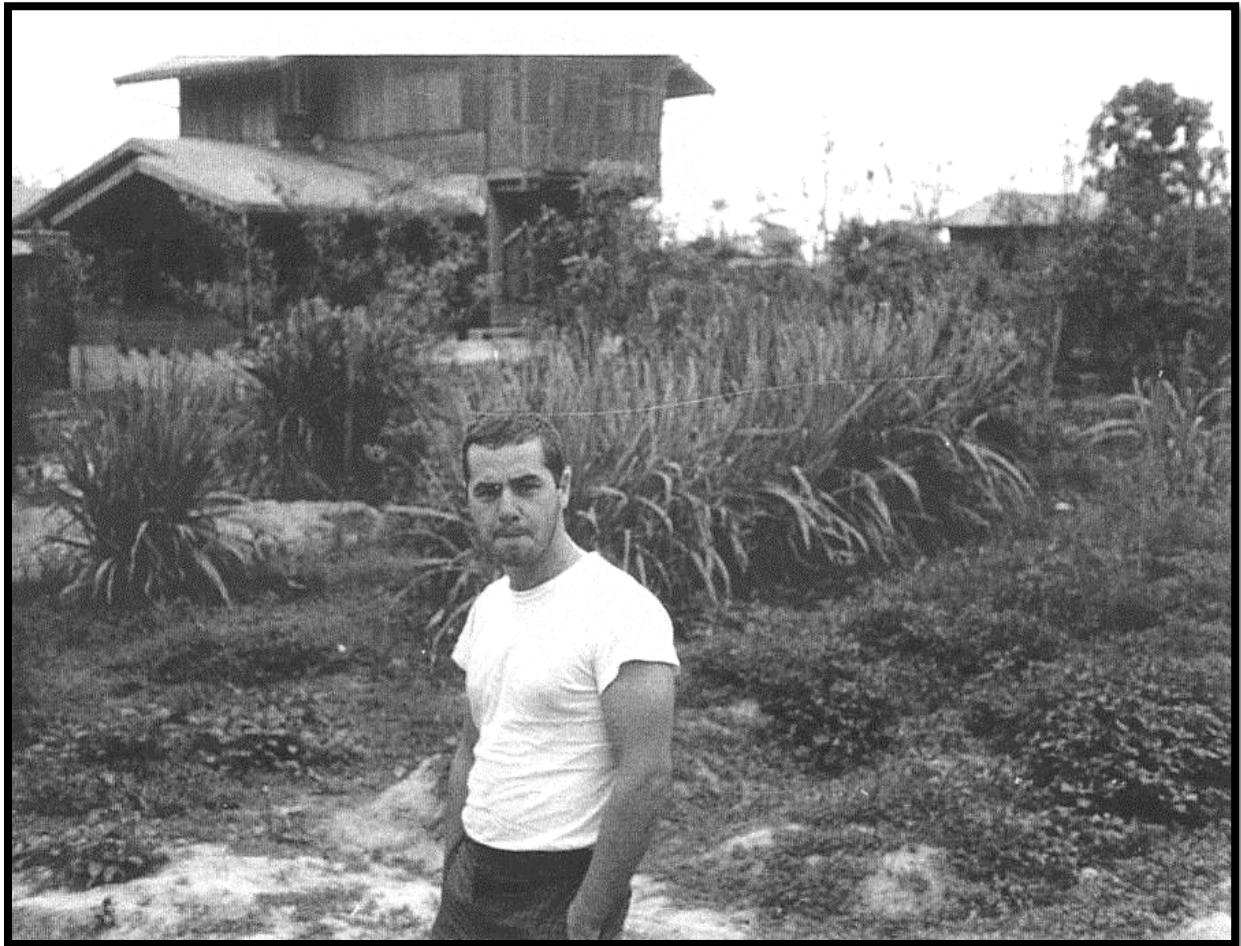
present in a house, Isan people might deposit it on the floor in the corner of a house instead of portraying their Royal Highnesses in an elevated position of respect.

With these factors to overcome, it was conceivable that communist ideology could easily make substantial inroads in these remote areas. Such an illiterate people, starved for attention and information, were highly susceptible to communist proselytizing. They tended to believe almost anything promised or alleged, particularly if initiated from an individual clothed in saffron colored monk robes. If Thailand expected to counter communism and achieve countrywide success encompassing all who lived there as citizens, past government neglect had to drastically change. To implement principles of nation building, the personnel in the MDU program had to first gain respect, and then indoctrinate the people by clearly explaining who they were and their place in Thai society. To achieve this, if plans went forward as planned, good roads would eventually link all remote villages into cohesive economic commercial units and market towns, and increase a positive flow of information. To supplement this strategy, foreign contractors were already erecting microwave relay antennae throughout the region in order to beam government propaganda to inexpensive miniature transistor radios distributed to the villages.

Based on former experience of other teams, to reinforce and support the movement, Gordon's group distributed pictures of the King and Queen and tri-colored flags. A movie projector, screen, and generator we carried would display government propaganda. Following an excellent lunch and a continuing people-to-people exercise, we left the Thai group overnight in San Gao. Because of USIS strict security regulations, Gordon could not overnight there and was obligated to return to Udorn with us.

Concluding my highly interesting participation in this particular phase of the rural development program, the subsequent two days were much the same, journeying to new model villages of Huey Khu Ap and Ban Na Chan Tha Li, and returning to San Gao, Chiang Khan, and Loei. These more developed areas had already benefited from new wells, roads, and medical clinics. Mohlam, a peculiar sing-song form of stringed folk music, provided another source of entertainment and semi-veiled government propaganda to the villagers. With girls dressed in rural costumes clapping, singing, and dancing to the music, it appeared an immensely popular activity, but one entirely incomprehensible to me. During our Third MEU deployment in 1962, I had listened to similar twanging music over the only station broadcasting it, until my tent mates threatened me with bodily harm.

The final day of that phase in the MDU work, my Captain was Bill Zeitler, a fellow New Jersey native. Bill's family lived in Homestead Park, part of Passaic Township near Chatham and Berkeley Heights, all tucked into the low hills above Route-22. Having worked at Koppers Chemical Company for a short time, I was familiar with some of the area, but with such a dense population I had never met Bill. Bill's mother used to shop in the Tepper and Rosenbaum department stores, and other down town Plainfield establishments on Front Street. After attending Norwich University, a Vermont military school, he served as a U.S. Army officer before joining Air America in July 1962. Equipped with a compact and muscular physique like a tank, he had achieved a state-wrestling championship while attending Morristown High School. When I learned about his wrestling background, I proposed entertaining the troops with a demonstration. Therefore, one evening we rolled around on the



An introspective Bill Zeitler dressed in the uniform of the day.
Nick Burke Collection.

grass outside the Club, displaying the sport's intricacies. However, I had to use caution, as my left knee was still tender from damage incurred by the previous year's dislocation at the Thai Army camp and originally at a match at Virginia Polytechnic Institute (VPI) in Blacksburg, Virginia. We shared another bond. Both of us, aspiring to pursue a medical profession, had matriculated in pre-medicine courses. Neither of us attained that goal, and Bill completed his higher education with a natural science degree. I enjoyed flying with Bill, for he exuded good humor and, like Tom Moher, possessed a full repertoire of interesting stories.¹⁰

¹⁰ William Zeitler Interview at Author's House, 09/01/01.
Bill Zeitler Email, 05/22/02.
VPI is now known as Virginia Tech University.

On the 14th, ostensibly to retrieve parts from a crashed Helio Courier, Wayne Knight, Flight Mechanic Reyes, and I ventured into Laos for a day. Helicopters were expensive to operate according to the hourly basis of a convoluted bookkeeping system, and presented a highly visible mechanism triggering visions of aggression and conflict among leftist leaders in Vientiane. Therefore, adhering to the October Geneva Accords deadline, few helicopters worked in Laos at the time. The ones that did involved specialized daily one-time work, USAID tasks, or our failed foray the previous year to retrieve critical articles from Riley's C-123. The opposite applied to the fixed wing group, who never ceased refugee supply work.

THE HELIO

The Helio Courier was one vehicle employed in the program's fixed wing support. Customers, mostly International Voluntary Services or USAID types, loved the plane, for the machine was inexpensive to operate and capable of landing at slow speeds on short, steeply pitched mountain strips where mountain goats might fear to tread. But despite its attributes, it still lacked the overall versatility of the H-34.

Introduced early into the Lao theater, after initial maintenance problems, the machine performed admirably transporting rice, people, and "hard rice" to remote corners of the country. During a period of recruiting human assets for the war, Agency Case Officers, Vang Pao, and AID workers also used the Helio in the important role of liaison between the many disparate and fractious Meo clans.



U-10 Helio Courier planes parked on the Wattay Airport flight line at Vientiane, Laos. The first U-10 arrived in Laos in October 1959. Much preferred by USAID, the machine flew during the entire war. Because of rough mountain STOL strips and unpredictable winds, many crashed. Most were recovered by maintenance teams and UH-34D pilots, and repaired.

Air America Log, Volume 5, #6, 1971.

Helio pilots quickly acquired a high degree of proficiency in the mountains. Although known for a tough interior tube frame, the tail dragger possessed one serious flaw: a very weak tail section. Despite retrofits to strengthen the fragile area, constant stress during frequent landings on rain furrowed and potholed strips caused insidious metal fatigue and eventual material failure in this section.

Crashes other than material failure resulted from adverse winds on final approach, as John Wiren had discovered in December at Phu Cum (Site-50). Most recently, on 9 February, Jim Rhyne planted B-833, the first of many Helio Couriers, on the Hong Non (Victor Site-86) strip, a stone's throw from the Pathet Lao-controlled zone around Sam Neua town.

During the 1961 through 1962 periods, Hong Non became the area district headquarters for the civilian administration and the military in upper Military Region Two. An excellent location for intelligence gathering and raids, it constituted one of several Meo-controlled sites located deep in Sam Neua Province. Resistance fighters, trained by a Thai PARU team and supported by Agency supplies, continued the fight until the Geneva Accord signing forced the program to cease aggressive operations for a time. Left to their own designs during the quiet period, with the war apparently about to break out once again, attempts were made to contact ADC units and FAR stragglers left in the bush.

Our task was to recover substantial portions of the aircraft for rebuild techniques performed by talented Chinese sheet metal workers.

After checking through Vientiane with the appropriate authorities, mostly to satisfy ICC regulations, we continued north into the mountains to Sam Tong for fuel and whatever briefing we could obtain about the remote area. We also loaded

two fuel drums should no gasoline be available in our area of operations.

At departure, clouds clung low along mountainsides and a smell of rain was in the air. We learned that direct flight at altitude was possible across the Plain of Jars if one remained well west of reported Xieng Khouang AAA, where Riley and his copilot had met their untimely end. As flight in this direction would save considerable time, we launched toward Ban Na and flew directly north to Phou Vieng, a site tucked into the hills a few miles off the Plain of Jars northwest corner. Located at 3,300 feet, overlooking the Khan River Valley, the old French Marquis site at Phou Vieng (VS-06) was one of three secure Meo locations in this area. Others were at Phu Cum (VS-50) and Bouam Long (VS-88). All were well located for observers to report on enemy movement north of the Plain.

After discharging fuel drums and passengers who tagged along--with the inception of air transportation some Meo forgot how to walk--we proceeded northeast over the Four Rivers checkpoint at Sop Kao, a distinctive river junction where the Nam Khan, Nam Hang, and Nam Kao merged, then past Bouam Long toward our destination. However, the further north we flew, the worse the low clouds and turbulence became. This confused me somewhat, for I assumed that the dry season extended well beyond February and the only hazards to flying and navigation consisted of smoke and haze, created by hill tribe slash and burn techniques. Still learning, I was unaware of inter-regional seasonal shifts, and anomalies in weather patterns that created northwest monsoon conditions on the east side of the Annamite Mountain chain and not the other. What we experienced at the time was the seasonal Vietnamese monsoon spilling over the mountainous border ranges into Sam Neua Province.



"Four Rivers" checkpoint and location of Lao Theung village Sop Kao in the valley between Phu Cum (VS-50) and Bouam Long (VS-88).
Mike Jarina Collection.

Frustrated by our inability to proceed the last forty miles to our destination, staying clear of Route-6, Na Khang (VS-36), and Houa Mounng (VS-58), we jockeyed between sites until late in the day when a break in the clouds enabled us to approach Hong Non. Located nine miles east of the Sam Neua Valley at 4,600 feet on the south side of a mountain range consisting of sheer cliffs and steep rocky slopes, I wondered how hostile forces could ever approach or capture such a formidable position. I was at the controls and while still at altitude, after looking at the tiny red gash disappearing into the mountainside, I was reminded of a Navy carrier's postage stamp size on the South China Sea.

I realized that I was still too inexperienced for such a difficult landing, and, much to my relief, perhaps sensing my uneasiness, Wayne elected to conduct the landing. For the time being, I was content to observe and learn from the more experienced Knight. Wayne, obviously a very good pilot, handled the nasty turbulence burbling across the lip of the sheer several thousand-foot drop, and jockeyed the machine upslope to the damaged Helio.

Everyone appeared happy to see us. Locals clothed in everyday black pajamas and a few smoothed-skinned men wearing green military fatigues, black berets, and speaking English, helped load Helio parts.¹

It was late before we were ready to depart. As I held my breath, Wayne bounced the heavily laden machine down the short

¹ Author Note: Although I had no idea who they were at the time, from their clothes, healthy looking appearance, and demeanor, it was relatively easy to distinguish other ethnic types from the squat Meo.

The men formed a Thai PARU team consisting of a leader, assistant, communications specialist, and a paramedic reintroduced to help train and plan missions for the local Meo cadre.
Charles Weldon, Tragedy in Paradise.



An example of one of many Helio Courier recovery operations performed by Air America ground mechanics and UH-34D helicopter crews at upcountry Lao sites.

CJ Abadie Collection.

runway, and after achieving translational lift, catapulted into the air.

Upon reaching Sam Tong, we required fuel, but it was already too late to clear the last mountain ridges before dark. While Wayne completed logbook entries, I called Udorn over the high frequency (HF) radio net stating our intentions to RON and our eight-hour thirty-five-minute flight time.

Leaving Reyes to monitor native-assisted refueling and begin his post flight inspection procedures, we walked toward the USAID warehouse. The Flight Mechanics really earned their pay, for no matter how fatigued they were at day's end, helicopter inspections were mandatory and necessary, particularly if one flew through heavy rain as we had that day. Part of the job entailed folding the tail pylon, climbing on top of the machine, or working off the transmission inspection decks, and laboriously hand greasing numerous zerk lubrication fittings on both the rotor head and tail rotor assemblies. With no maintenance facilities upcountry, in lieu of purging bearings with a high-pressure gun to remove all traces of abrasive dust and dirt, the less effective method of manual hand greasing was the only means available. Often performed by flashlight in the dark, this process depended largely on a conscientious Flight Mechanic. Some mechanics were more attentive to H-34 inspections than others. Despite different training backgrounds, this seemed strange, as all crewmembers shared in the machine's ultimate fate during the daily operational phase. According to line boss, John Aspinwall, over long periods working in dusty conditions, failure to properly grease critical bearings led to many of our future vibration problems.

KONG LE

Inside the drab quarters, generally suited to accommodate his own needs, Pop made us comfortable as possible with conversation centering on the plight of his beloved Meo people. He also regaled us with the latest news concerning Kong Le's travails and events unfolding on the Plain of Jars. Apparently, political struggles were fast coming to a head. Credible spies reported heightened tensions between Neutralist and Pathet Lao factions after Colonel Ketsana Vongsouvanh, one of the original seventeen officers involved in the successful August 1960 coup, was shot in the back and killed on the 12th at Phong Savan (Site-21). Following the November shoot-down of former U.S. Naval aviator Fred Riley, Ketsana, considered Kong Le's right-hand man, was nearly assassinated after attempting to arrest suspected members of the artillery unit implicated in the treachery. He was also a highly vocal type, resisting communist sympathy among his Neutralist troops, and urging the ICC to investigate North Vietnamese Army presence along border areas. In newspaper articles, he often criticized the FAN Deuanist splinter group and the NLHX, the political arm of the Pathet Lao movement. For months both right and left elements badgered Kong Le and his men, vying for control of FAN troops. As a result, serious divisions developed in the Neutralist organization. Some Neutralist units defected to the PL cause, and the communist supply line diverted critical material from Kong Le's forces to the Pathet Lao. Now, with Ketsana's recent murder and Kong Le's orders that all Pathet Lao and defectors rallying to Colonel Deuane be excluded from areas he controlled, fueled speculation that armed hostilities would soon occur between the factions. Hoping they would kill each other, we relished such action, for we heartily disliked both elements.

Never particularly amicable, the division between Neutralist and Pathet Lao forces widened considerably after the assassination of Kong Le's field commander, Colonel Ketsana. Naturally the assassins were never found. Neutralist spokesmen in Vientiane publicly accused Pathet Lao of committing the murder, but, except for displaying remorse, restricting his troops to base, and ordering the Pathet Lao out of his enclaves, Kong Le failed to overtly react. Perhaps a previous threat from a top Pathet Lao officer of plans to terminate the top four Neutralist leaders had some bearing on the episode. Another more logical reason probably stemmed from the PL's recent arming with Chinese automatic weapons and stronger military advantage.

To enhance FAN's defensive positions, Kong Le concentrated in the northern and western Plain of Jars. Token FAN troops ranged into the Ban Ban Valley, but most of Kong Le's territorial control extended from the Xieng Khouang airfield along Route-7 to Moung Soui.

Neither faction appeared to be planning major military moves against the other, but the acrimony between them had the potential of resulting in overt conflict at any time.

In a memorandum from the National Security Council (NSC) to the President, intelligence anticipated that Kong Le's military position on the Plain of Jars could soon become critical. Pathet Lao and Viet Minh elements were rumored to have positioned forces around the PDJ. Leaders in Vientiane speculated that PL leaders might intend to quickly overrun Kong Le should he not be rendered ineffective by the defecting units.

The message went on to state that Kong Le represented Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma's sole domestic military and political support. In the event of a large-scale Pathet Lao attack, it was suspected that FAN could only hold positions on the Plain of Jars for a few days. Therefore, the NSC believed it was in USG's

interest to go along with Souvanna Phouma's continuing requests for greater aid, and support Kong Le with sufficient material to survive long enough to provide Western nations time to implement a diplomatic offensive under protocols of the Geneva Accords. Averill Harriman recommended that the Vientiane Embassy, JUSMAG Bangkok, and Commander in Chief, Pacific Command (CINCPAC) expedite the flow of supplies to Kong Le through channels approved by Souvanna Phouma. Furthermore, he wanted CINCPAC, JUSMAAG, and CIA to cooperate with Vientiane in preparing methods to deliver arms, ammo, and other critical war materiel to the PDJ on an emergency basis should fighting suddenly occur.²

² Segment Sources:

Edward Keefer and Glenn LaFantasie eds., *Lao Crisis* 443.

Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Country Series, Laos, Memorandum from Michael V. Forrestall of the National Security Council Staff to President Kennedy, 02/20/63.

CIA, Office of Current Intelligence, Weekly Summary, Factional Tensions Increasing in Laos, 02/21/63.

Time Magazine, *And Then There were Three*, 03/01/63, Internet.

Victor Anthony and Richard Sexton, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: The War in Northern Laos* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Air Force History, 1993), 81.

We returned to Udorn the following day, flush with pride over our successful aircraft recovery, and knowledge that we might receive a little hazardous pay for our efforts deep inside enemy territory. However, this compensation was certainly not guaranteed, for I still impatiently awaited payment of over a hundred dollars for project hours flown during October. Ab indicated that the Customer had not yet authorized the sums. Despite his efforts, and particularly galling to me, the period in question included the day a "duck hunter" whacked Tom Moher and me while en route to Sayaboury town. I did not believe any job could be any more hazardous than that.

Because of the time-sharing process Operations established between First Officers and other factors, I did not fly again for three weeks.

Rumor and speculation around the Air America compound was rampant concerning the contract expiration on the 20th. Scuttlebutt dictated that should the contract not be renewed, half of our pilots, or eighteen men, would be terminated. If so, then my prospects for continued employment did not appear particularly bright. I was not even positive that I wanted to remain with a company that failed to properly sort out back pay..."don't mess with a man's liberty, mail, or pay."

In the interim period, Taipei dispatched a Chinese ground school instructor to Udorn for a week to teach some of us airline transport regulations in preparation to obtain such a license (ATR). Fixed wing pilots flying a Chinese registered C-47, C-46, some Caribous and Helio Couriers, and helicopter pilots rated to fly Bell B-803 were required to obtain the license. However, we peons could not comprehend why bush pilots

should be required to obtain the ticket. Held in the dogleg section of the new Club, perhaps tailored as another Rousselot make-work activity for bored and under worked pilots, the instructor held excellent classes and presented a first-rate review. ¹

TRIP ACROSS THE MEKONG

Fairy decided to resume her occupation as a World Travel Service tourist guide in Bangkok, as she had threatened over the previous five months. Perhaps she was exasperated with me for not proposing marriage, or because of economics. Whatever her reason, she really did not understand that with my continued employment with Air America in question, I could not possibly contemplate a more permanent relationship or assume added responsibilities at that time. Also, further muddling the situation, I had independently discovered that she exceeded my age by seven years, was divorced, and the mother of several teenage sons. I could not help but wonder what other facts she had failed to divulge, and might surface. Before she departed, we decided to conduct an overnight trip to Vientiane. Other than the occasional trip to the airport and embassy commissary, I had seen very little of the city. Foreigners required passports and visas to enter the country by ground transportation, but, because of a liberal inter-country agreement, Thais could enter at will for twenty-four hours with no documentation other than a Thai identification card.

¹ Author Note: I heard no more regarding a requirement for an ATR until later when our pilot force was greatly diminished. At that time, Scratch Kanach informed me that all of us would obtain a Chinese ATR by the end of 1963 or we would not retain our jobs. This was a bombshell just when work increased and I felt more secure about the job. However, when the war appreciably heated up, all talk of obtaining an ATR petered out and was forgotten until 1967.

While traveling on the train to Nong Khai, I met fellow American Joe Thorne. Marveling at the small world we lived in, during the course of conversation, I discovered he was also from Plainfield, New Jersey, and had lived on Rose Street near Evergreen Park. Working with Western Electric, he was currently in Southeast Asia erecting microwave towers at sites throughout Thailand. I wondered if broadcasts would soon be beamed from the towers into the northeast and received over the transistor radios recently distributed in villages visited with Gordon Murchie.

After crossing the wide Mekong to Tha Deua boat landing (literally, fig tree boat landing), we checked through the customs-immigration point. During the twelve-mile taxi ride to the city along a largely unimproved road, we were stopped at three separate roadblocks manned with uniformed troops representing each government faction. This was a new experience for me, one that was unexpected and somewhat disconcerting. Once we arrived in the city, some of the apprehension left me, but I found it difficult to feel completely comfortable in the environment.

HISTORY

Impacting both Laos and Thailand, the history of Vientiane was quite interesting. Thousands of years before the city became important as the country's administrative capital, Lao river valleys were divided into independent muang, or fiefdoms. Preferring fertile alluvial plains to the rougher interior, many people settled in the Vientiane area. In 307 BC, monks returning from study in India carried a carved relic of the Lord Buddha. Under the first ruler of Vientiane, they began to erect the first That Luang Stupa to house the holy historical object.



Restaurants lined the Thai side of the Mekong bank where spectators could dine and enjoy the aquatic scenery. Photo taken about 1968, but not much had changed from 1963.

Author Collection.

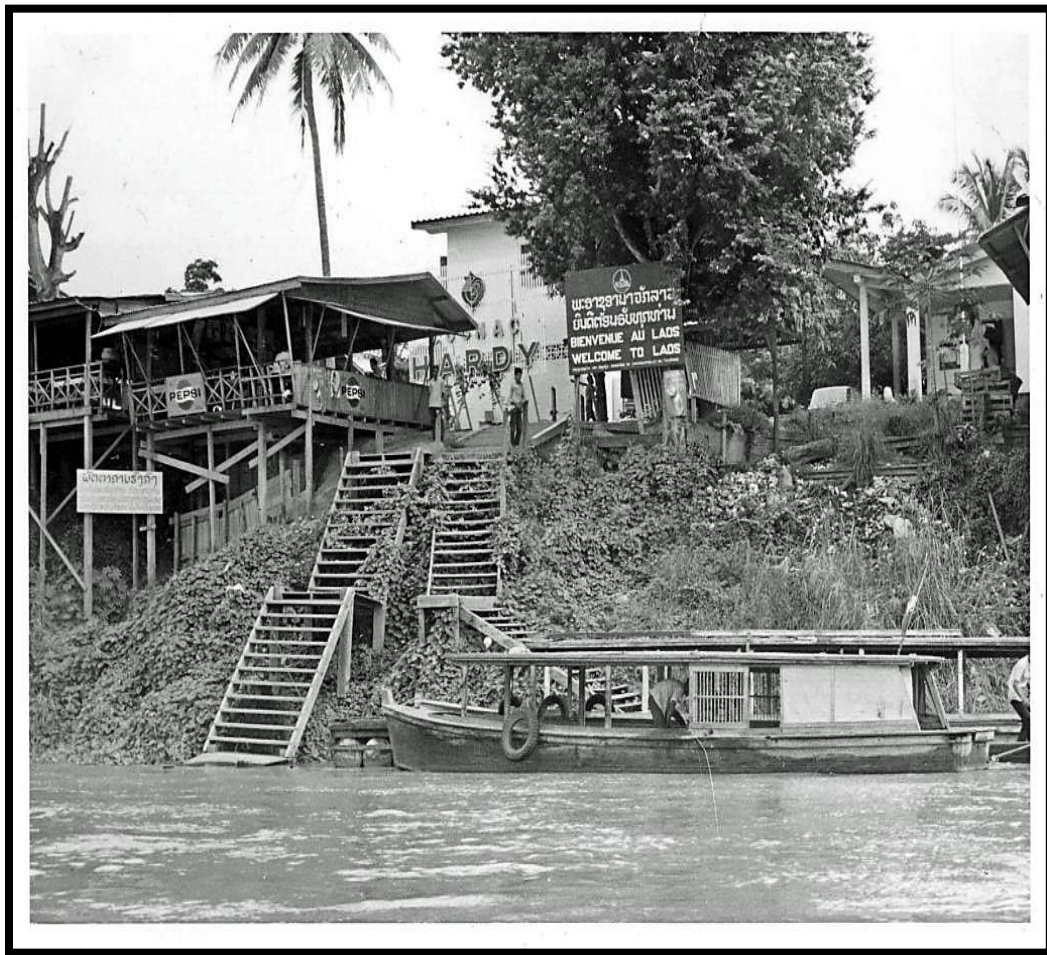


Thai ferry boat moored on right bank of the Mekong River.
Author Collection.



View across the broad Mekong River from Nong Khai, Thailand. Except for air or swimming, boats were the only mode of transportation available crossing to Vientiane.

Author Collection.



The Tha Deua boat landing on the Lao bank of the Mekong River.

Vientiane flourished in peace for many centuries. In the 13th century, the area came under the influence of the Lanna Thai Kingdom until the rise of Fa Ngum. Originally from Luang Prabang, King Fa Ngum defeated the Thai Lanna, restored Vientiane to Lao rule, and by 1353 expanded the Lang Xang Kingdom (the million elephants) into the largest region. Under his reign, the kingdom enjoyed good relations with the Khmer civilization (Cambodia, where he had been raised) and the rulers of Annam (Vietnam today). Additionally, the state religion became Theravada Buddhism.

In 1373, Fa Ngum's successor organized the kingdom and built many temples and schools. After ruling over the Lanna Kingdom in Chiang Mai, Sethathirath returned to Vientiane. Succeeding to his father's throne, he brought the Emerald Buddha to the city, erected additional temples, and declared Vientiane the capital of Lan Xang in 1560.

The 17th century became Lan Xang's golden age and Vientiane remained a powerful capital under Suliya Vongsa. However, by 1707, because of internal power struggles, Lan Xang was divided into three kingdoms: Vientiane, Luang Prabang, and Champassak. Taking advantage of the fragmented and weakened realms to their east, Siamese and Burmese leaders began campaigns against the kingdoms. In 1779, the Siamese invaded Vientiane and moved the Emerald Buddha to Bangkok. Following a series of bloody wars, the Siamese looted, sacked, and burned Vientiane. Abandoned for many decades, many residents of the city and the kingdoms elected to migrate across the Mekong. By the end of the 19th century, Vientiane again came under Siamese influence. After French intervention, an agreement between the two powers divided

Laos. Siam received all territories east and south and the French assumed the rest of the country. ²

EXPLORING VIENTIANE

We enjoyed leisurely shopping and sightseeing along wide tree-lined boulevards and observed numerous temples. At one of the many electronic shop houses, I purchased a twenty-minute tape to record everyday reflections for the folks back home. At another store, I discovered tax-free booze at very reasonable prices. Following a good dinner at a second floor "French" restaurant, which served the standard steak and fries, we retired to an unimpressive hotel.

Many changes had evolved in the city since Clarence Abadie's first impressions almost two years earlier. The large infusion of foreigners, and particularly their money, imparted to the French colonial backwater a frontier-like atmosphere. Bars and brothels such as the OK Corral, Dixie, White Rose, Casbah & Grill, and Turkey Farm, emerged as well as one gambling casino. Providing a touch of the USA for their employees, the Bird and Son company built and owned a California-style motel with a swimming pool on the Wattay Airport Road.

As a sign of progress, a single traffic light had been installed at a busy intersection. Despite such modernization, the rest of the town exhibited considerable decay. Storefronts and slatted wood sidewalks sagged, warped, and buckled from years of traffic, tropical weather and neglect. Green colored government buildings dotted the area with very little business occurring within. Foreign embassies representing many countries abounded. Noodle parlors, opium dens, dancehalls, Indian

² *Discover Laos Magazine.*



A timeless street scene in Vientiane, Laos, depicting the casual lifestyle occurring in the early sixties. Shop-houses, although in disrepair, are largely constructed of concrete, far surpassing the early wooden structures in Udon, Thailand.

National Geographic, Volume 120, #2, 1961.



Passenger boat arriving at Nong Khai from the Tha Deua port on the Lao side of the Mekong.

Author Collection.

moneychangers, Vietnamese jewelry shops, Corsican restaurants, a French school and hospital, a USIS library, an American military aid compound, temples, two beauty salons, and morning-afternoon outdoor markets all greatly enhanced the city's local color. Toward the outskirts of town and along the river, crumbling villas attested to the past glory and luxury of French influence.³

The short trip had been interesting, fun. The following day, after re-crossing the Mekong we hired a mini-taxi to drive us sixty-miles south over the laterite and pot-holed road to Udorn.

³ Pamela Sanders description of the city in her novel, *Miranda*.

As the weather turned hot and muggy, employee tempers cranked up proportionally, and any cordiality that had previously existed largely ceased. Those individuals who perceived themselves on "thin ice" with management increasingly became defensive, taking exception to any alleged or actual management slight. I witnessed evidence of this one day when Abadie yelled something sarcastic at "Pinky" Eaton from the operations porch. Normally, Abadie addressed his subordinates by the formal title of Captain, but not in this case. Obviously, neither man was the favorite of the other and George Eaton retorted in almost an equally obnoxious tone, "What's that, Abadie?" The bitter exchange shocked everyone in the immediate area, and Eaton's days with Air America were judged numbered.

The slowdown in flight operations also weighed heavily on management. Rumors proliferated that Abadie was having marital problems at home, and that Rousselot daily inundated him with queries about everything imaginable. This was believable, for everyone understood that Rouss could be a very difficult man to satisfy even during good times.

Whether calculated or not, Project Manager Ben Moore's appearance lent a sorely needed comic relief to our doom and gloom attitude. Throughout the day, the former Navy captain sat on the screened porch on his deck chair puffing cigars. Displaying the image of a bulky ship commander surveying his domain, he dressed in a white tee-shirt and Bermuda shorts from which his knobby knees protruded. Resembling a celestial cherub wreathed in a halo of smoke, the sheen from his bald head was somewhat moderated under the shaded porch.

Directly after transferring administration and operations departments from the original location to the new-old facility, the steps leading to the screened porch became a popular gathering place for pilots after checking the mail and flight schedule to sit and gossip about latest rumors. At times when deemed too noisy or perhaps disturbing his serenity, Ben Moore charged out of his office or captain's chair and chased us away.

TAKHLI

Sometime during Bangkok trips, pilots learned of a remote, highly sensitive base located at Takhli (Sierra-05) in the jungle northwest of Bangkok. On one occasion, low on fuel, Ed Reid had landed at the site unannounced and was nearly arrested by base security. Perhaps Ed landed at the base on the wrong day, for other pilots had refueled or deposited cargo there with no admonition pertaining to security, and had observed nothing out of the ordinary. Naturally, lack of knowledge about the mysterious based piqued our curiosity.

The first time I heard the name Takhli whispered was while checking my mail on the porch of the new operations building. In muted tones, the individual added that we were not supposed to talk about the base, adding that even mentioning the name constituted grounds for termination. Although tempted to pursue the forbidden subject as a matter of human nature, the threat was effective, but we still wondered what activities took place at Takhli. The situation was not much different from security measures taken while in the military. One never talked about classified or sensitive items, or confirmed half-truths printed in civilian newspapers. Additionally, we were duly warned not to converse with snooping reporters. However, as reasonable men, we liked to command respect and have items explained to us. Furthermore, learning about security items by osmosis was not

considered a proper method with which management should handle us troops.

Although freely discussed among some fixed wing crews who operated there, Takhli remained generally secret until an F-101 crashed into a village near the base. After that incident, we began to hear rumors about B-26s, underground hangars, and U-2 spy plane flights into other countries.

Rubin Cortez served in the military at the Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base from October 1962 to October of the following year. When he first checked in to the country, superiors instructed him not to mention details concerning any outlying airbase. He was assigned to Takhli as an avionics maintenance worker in the communications center, where only two men worked twenty-four-hour shifts. A year later, twenty-four men performed the same tasks.

There was not much at the base initially. Rubin billeted in an open air two story barracks that utilized the ground floor as an NCO club. Airmen liked to joke that the accommodations were left over from the World War Two Japanese era, but in actuality, the base was built in the late 1950s. One person recalled the area as mostly jungle during his first tour. Now, many new buildings and facilities were in place, or in the process of construction by the end of Cortez's tour.

In reality, the base consisted of two bases. The covert portion lay in the complex's center surrounded by fences and patrolled by Thai guards. Consisting of a high security, self-sufficient base, it housed U-2 spy planes in above and underground hangars. Rubin did not recall seeing B-26s, and never really knew what clandestine activity transpired within the inner-sanctum. Thai pilots flew F-86s, and the USAF staged F-100 and F-101s there.

Civilian clothes were the uniform of the day and special authorization was required to enter the airbase. The small town of Takhli, situated just off base in a rice paddy area, was never off limits, and personnel could journey there by bus or motorized vehicles driven by locals. ¹

JUSMAAG placed all Bangkok work on hold because of aviation fuel mismanagement. Therefore, with time on our hands, Abadie informed us that the latest program from Taipei required each of us to prepare and deliver lectures pertaining to H-34 systems or its operation. To monitor the content and progress of these lectures, Rouss required outline copies sent to him in Taipei. The ongoing ground school was now conducted in the upper section of the number one hangar's recently completed offices. There was also a supplementary purpose attached to the ground school. Besides being part of Rousselot's make-work agenda to keep us busy and out of trouble, for some time the Company and Customer had harbored an uncertainty concerning formal pilot schooling. The answer to that question was simple: there never was any formal training. Therefore, because of serious past accidents and insurance concerns, both desired something like a documented military training program that included initial and recurring ground school. Therefore, with little research material available, and no formal instructors, we began in-house lectures.

AIR AMERICA CLUB

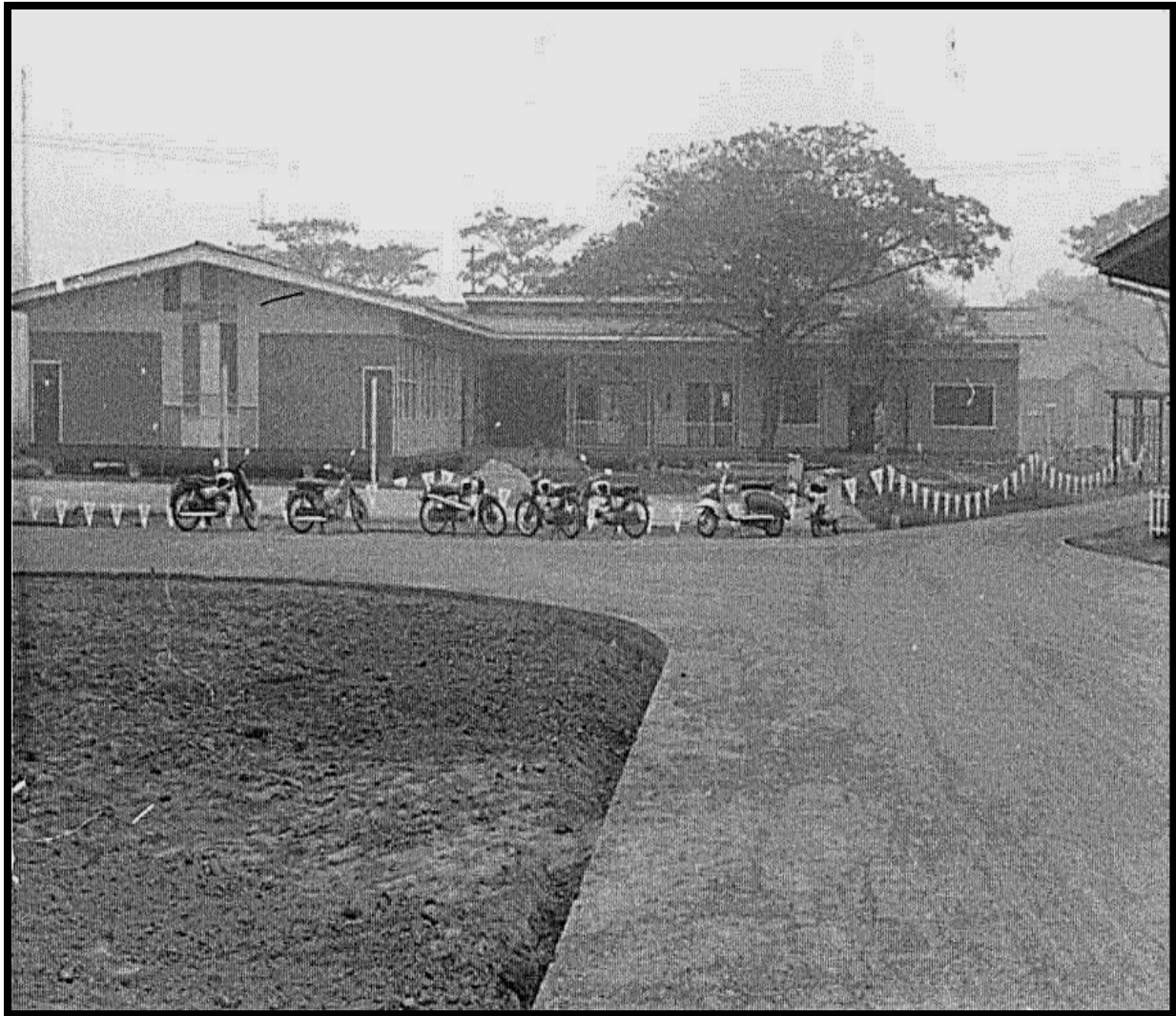
As work on the Club neared completion, Ben coerced a few pilots into cleaning up debris and landscaping the area. Dick Elder, a self-professed jack-of-all-trades, had previous

¹ Fellow Southern Natural Gas Company employee Rubin Cortez's interview with the Author at Toca, Louisiana.



New "L" shaped Air America Club. The screened porch area leads to the dining room. Right portion contains a bathroom, sleeping quarters, and Ben Moore's office.

Nick Burke Collection March-April 1963.



Side view of new Club. Left side a combination movie-meeting room, dining room-bar, sleeping accommodations, office, and storeroom. In front are parked an assortment of crewmember motorbikes, motorcycles, and scooters.

Nick Burke Collection, April 1963.

experience in this vocation, so he was placed in charge of the group. Tom Moher contributed a Japanese type bridge to complement the water fountain. Dan Gardner offered to write to liquor companies he was familiar with in order to obtain items for the Club. Following Dan's literary efforts, an uncle, owner of a Hawaiian hotel, eventually provided napkins and additional necessities. To operate the dining room and kitchen, a pair of experienced Taiwanese were hired, Y.C. Wang, as headwaiter, S.P. Hsieh, as head chef. Compared with the food served at the old Marine snack bar, the meals "S.P." prepared were outstanding. The two key men remained with Air America for many years and became indispensable to the efficient running of the Club.

The Thai "sticky finger" was well established. Therefore, since many individuals participated in the Club's accounting and operation, Moore, in an attempt to simplify a scarce commodity and minimize employee thievery, elected to utilize a chit system to purchase food and drinks. The method, much like the cashless military payment certificate (MPC) system used on military bases outside the United States, was time tested and worked efficiently.

SOPA VILLA

Following heavy rain, water collected on the east side of the house. Therefore, the landlord had dirt hauled in for workmen to fill hollows in anticipation of building a badminton court. I thought he was probably blowing smoke, and he was.

I considered some of the neighbors living on either side of us squatters. A cut above others, the closest ones on the west side were friendly and accessible, and Jim and I conversed easily with them from our back porch or open windows. The husband, a pleasant guy who spoke a little English, worked at the Thai Air Force fuel farm located directly across the main

road on extensive RTAF airport property. I judged the facility near enough to our area that if it ever exploded, our house would be among those flattened. After the woman yakked at me one day about something, I asked her husband what she said. Apparently, she considered all Americans wealthy and she planned to obtain some of that money. I never discovered out how she planned to do this until later.

Greatly disturbing our peace and quiet, the couple's newborn infant cried continuously for about ten days. Unable to stand any more screaming, one day I inquired as to the problem and was informed the child was quite sick. Addressing me in a Thai singsong version of you-you (khun-khun), the sarong-clad lady badgered me to provide medicine for her baby. A little embarrassed, I replied that I was not a trained physician and she should take the child downtown to a doctor or hospital. No, such action was unthinkable, for not only was it very expensive, people always died in the hospital. *Yeah, I thought to myself, because they failed to seek medical attention or enter a hospital until too late, and were quite possibly close to expiring anyway.* She kept after me for help, so I sought advice from Jerry McEntee, who knew the family and claimed to have attended two years medical school. Since we were almost on our own maintaining our health (there were no prior Company briefings about health issues or indigenous diseases), I consulted with him frequently about medical matters. While Jerry lived at Sopa, he had dispensed medicine and advice to the family, so they wrongly assumed that all Americans were doctors or possessed medical knowledge. Since they refused to consult a bona fide doctor, Jerry recommended that I offer them one aspirin cut into eight sections, with instructions to give the baby one piece along with a bottle of water every four to five



Western view from the breezeway separating the main house from the kitchen bathroom area. Our Thai neighbor lived next door and there were more people on this side of the house than the eastern portion. After Spillis departed, I was the sole "farang" living in the area for almost two years.

Spillis Collection March-April 1963.

hours. He believed the small amount of analgesic would cause no harm to the child and possibly assuage the parents' concern.

Finally, the crying suddenly ceased and I assumed the child recovered. Unfortunately, I was wrong.

MOTORCYCLE PERILS

The axiom of "there are motorcyclists who have experienced accidents and there are those who will crash" rang true in our organization when a few of our employees suffered from a series of accidents. We euphemistically described minor incidents as "Honda Rash." Inattention, carelessness, or what we called a drunken bike generally perpetrated the more serious ones. As an example of the latter, Dick Nelson, after departing the snack bar one evening highly impaired, failed to slow down and turn left at the main road. Instead, surging across the road at high speed, he went airborne and terminated flight in a drainage klong just short of adjacent rice paddies. Escaping death or permanent injury, he fractured a shoulder blade, but sealed his fate by becoming an instant enemy of Ben Moore.

Dick's heavy drinking also led to his losing large sums of money during high stake poker games. Mike Marshall and Jack Connor tried to protect him from the circling sharks and cheaters in the group, but when the two were upcountry, he was at the mercy of unscrupulous players. Over time, he lost so much money that the others refused to let him play, and he quietly departed Air America for Boston, owing people money. Marshall and Nelson roomed together in 1962, and Mike was quite surprised after his return from an upcountry trip to find Dick gone. ²

² Mike Marshall Letter, 10/10/92.
Mike Marshall Email, 09/06/99.

Attempting to remain somewhat cool, daytime walk-about and biking attire during the hot season consisted of shorts, a shirt, and shower shoes, commonly known as flip-flops. While hurrying to attend morning ground school so dressed, Bob Hitchman ploughed into the rear of a truck which had abruptly stopped on the main road. The sudden stoppage tossed Bob high into the air and onto the hard pavement, resulting in a serious head fracture. As there were no facilities to treat such injuries either at the Air America clinic, STARCOMM, or in town, Bob was evacuated to the Bangkok Christian Hospital, where he spent the better part of a month in a coma.

Two other serious accidents involved tangling with nocturnal samlor drivers. After leaving the Air America compound, about two minutes before I arrived at the entrance of Soi Wat Po, Skip Halsey and his wife Charlotte smashed into a slower vehicle pedaling on the dark main road. Mrs. Halsey, who sat behind her husband, flipped backward off the bike at impact, badly injuring her head. Skip was limping. As transportation arrived to deliver them to medical attention, I offered to wheel the 125cc motorcycle down the street to Sopa. After overnight safekeeping in the wood-slat cage under the house, I promised to return the machine to Skip the following day.

A daylight inspection revealed the bike relatively undamaged. Therefore, late morning after bending and twisting a couple of broken spokes so they would not contact the wheel fork, I departed for the Halsey residence across town on Prachak Road. As I rounded the second traffic circle, a spoke vibrated loose and tangled around the fork, causing a sudden stoppage. Fortunately, I was not driving fast, but the momentum still launched me over the handlebars. I had not experienced anything like that since Bill Peters and I participated in an unscheduled flying act in the snowy, icy hills overlooking Iwakuni, Japan.

This time, I terminated the flight on soft dirt bordering the side of the road and, except for my pride, was not hurt. After I recovered from the initial shock and regained composure, somewhat embarrassed, I furtively glanced around to see if anyone had witnessed the foolish clown in his flying act. No problem, with the sun directly overhead and a very hot day, no one was in sight. After re-securing the spoke, I very carefully continued my journey. Skip was home but, like Hitchman, Charlotte ended up at the Bangkok Christian Hospital for an extended period.

The final incident involved a Filipino employee. All accidents included a common thread: absolutely no one wore protective clothing or headgear.

While the rash of vehicle accidents reached its zenith, my 50cc Honda Commander began acting up. The engine in the machine I had purchased from Don Buxton lacked compression, especially during the kick-start cycle, and developed a noticeable piston slap. Frustrating, at times the lights extinguished and the engine stopped.

Ab Rivero, who had previously repaired some of the pilots' bike engines, was on home leave, so ground mechanic Dwayne Meyers offered to overhaul the bike in his spare time by replacing the piston rings. Dwayne lived in the first bungalow to the right in Chet's compound, not far from our old residence. While looking for a new house with Fairy, I had met Khun Chet, who maintained a waiting list of Americans wanting houses he intended to build and rent. From all accounts, the friendly, unassuming man was a reasonable person, not greedy, and interacted well with Americans. He also owned a tiny blue coupe, one of the only cars I saw in Udorn. He was also father of two cute young daughters. Both appeared normal, but on closer examination, one little girl possessed a pair of blue eyes, the

other one a brown and a blue eye. In a country where dark eyes were dominant, the genetic aberration was curious and highly noticeable.

Dwayne Meyers, who planned to return shortly to the USA with his Thai wife, Pen, began work on the bike with parts I purchased in town. He took his time overhauling it, and in the interim, I shared Jim Spillis' Honda Cub, but after two weeks badgering him, he completed the job. He would not accept payment, so I presented him with a case of beer when I retrieved the bike. Whatever he had accomplished, it failed to correct the problem. An engine noise sounding as if a piston slap developed, and the bike still lost power and quit. The only way I could correct this condition before the motor quit was by gearing down to second and wrapping on throttle to maintain RPM.

Somehow, USAID officials in Bangkok discovered a supply of aviation gasoline, and the joint Thai-American program to reach out and touch remote people in the country resumed. Toward the end of the month, Jim Spillis commenced a ten-day trip to Chiang Mai with Tom Moher and Flight Mechanic "Blackie" Mondello in Hotel Romeo. Originating from Bangkok under the auspices of AID, they flew a medic to Northwest Thailand into many hill tribe villages. Beginning several days of missions, they RON at Phitsanulok, Thailand, (Sierra-01) and from the time of departure until return in the evening they never met an English speaker. They merely pointed to items and offered baht to obtain what they wanted. In the villages, the medic examined people and dispensed band-aids and aspirins for all minor ailments.

Adding his contribution to the people-to-people program, Tom thought it would be a nice gesture to distribute candy, so they loaded the helicopter and passed out sweets to the children and adults. During the trips, Jim was fascinated by the similarity between some of the tribes to Florida Seminole Indians. The women twisted their long hair to resemble a sunbonnet and fashioned dresses from bright, colorful pieces of material.

During their first night at a Chiang Mai hotel, a man tempted the crew with woman flesh for whoopee. Jim estimated the girls' ages about nine years, so he politely declined the offer. Sorely conflicted, Tom decided to taste the morsels, and later indicated they were not as young as they looked and definitely



March 1963 trip to Chiang Mai area. Flight Mechanic "Blackie" Mondello and Captain Tom Moher kneeling in front of tribal group visited during USAID trip to northern Thailand. Mondello is wearing the standard issue gray "bush" hat. Senior helicopter pilot Moher wears the original barracks type Captain cover with an Air America emblem issued at the time of his hire.

Spillis Collection.



Captain Tom Moher distributing candy to tribal children during a ten-day USIS mission to the Chiang Mai, Thailand, area.

Spillis Collection.



Tribal group visited in northern Thailand.
Spillis Collection.

experienced ladies. ¹

The Moher-Spillis trip to Chiang Mai was not our group's first journey there, or even particularly unique. During early February, Wayne Knight, Dick Todd, and Flight Mechanic Maglanoc flew several shuttles in the region. During the period, Wayne met Gordon Young, one of the renowned Young family members, who enlightened him about the wild and fierce Southeast Asian gaur.

Gordon marked the third generation of the Young family to live and work with tribal groups in Burma and Thailand. His grandfather, a Baptist missionary, was sent to northeast Burma in 1898. His father continued the work establishing missions among the hill people. Raised among Lahu, Gordon spoke only this language for many years. While travelling through Burma and northern Thailand with his father Harold, Gordon learned to speak Wa, Shan, Kachin, Yunnanese, Lahu-shim and Lahu-na.

In contrast to younger brother Bill's lack of intellectual pursuits, Gordon, who authored a book on the subject of the northern tribal groups, enjoyed success in Thailand. He also had a sense of humor as evidenced in a story Bill called "a farang's revenge." Not long after Gordon's book was published, he was standing in a Thai grocery store checkout line. In the early 1960s, when few foreigners spoke the Thai language fluently, some people, particularly Thai women, made less than flattering comments about others who were different. It was not uncommon for a westerner to be compared to an elephant, water buffalo, or parts of other animals. ²

¹ Jim Spills Letter, 08/17/96.
Jim Spillis Interview, 02/09/97.

² Author Note: In all fairness, colloquial use of animal terms, particularly in the south, was used in the U.S. in the days before political correctness. Terms like old biddy, young chick, young rooster, spring chicken, young heifer, young stud, and other slang terms were heard.

That day, Gordon overheard two Thai ladies standing behind him discussing and speculating about his physical attributes. Without realizing that Gordon understood and spoke perfect Thai, they joked, "*Look at that farang...He is hairy as a monkey.*" Taking exception to such the simian comparison, Gordon whirled toward the women. Then, beginning to unzip his fly, he loudly stated in fluent Thai, "If you want to see hair, I will really show you some good pubic hair." Shocked beyond reason, the ladies panicked, dropped their groceries, and dashed from the store. ³

Knight's journeys to the north continued in mid-March when he returned to Chiang Mai, then shuttled Lao dignitaries from Chiang Kong on the Mekong River to Chiang Rai for a joint high-level military celebration. Herb Baker and Flight Mechanic Lacsina were part of Hotel-14's crew. Although a Captain, Baker, recently returned from what would be many sojourns from Air America, had not flown for some time, and was along for the customary re-fam. The crew was treated royally at the party, and a pleasant surprise awaited them in their hotel rooms.

Wayne's northern exposure was repeated with a four-day trip into Karin country in early April. Along with Thai counterparts, USAID Bangkok arranged a people-to-people trip. The importance of the trip was evidenced by the fact that the Director of USIS and Patricia Young, wife of the U.S. Ambassador, Kenneth T. Young, along with Thai dignitaries and an interpreter, journeyed to the villages. Utilizing Chiang Mai as base camp, they flew to places northwest close to and down the Burma border. All had unfamiliar names: Mae Hong Son (Sierra-06), Khun Yuam (Sierra-

³ Gordon Young, *Hilltribes of Northern Thailand* (Bangkok, 1962).
Bill Young Interview Chiang Mai, Thailand, 10/19/95.
Joe Flipse Emails, 05/13/97 (2).



Wayne Knight's UH-34D parked outside a Karen tribal village west of Chiang Mai, Thailand, during an April 1963 trip to northern Thailand.
Knight Collection.



With the aid of Thai officials and local tribesmen, Captain Wayne Knight refuels his helicopter with a manual wobble pump at a remote location in northern Thailand.

Knight Collection.



April 1963 trip to Chiang Mai, Thailand, area in support of USIS and Thai government tribal area visits. Captain Knight looking beyond a Thai dignitary at finely attired Karen maidens holding posters of the Thai King. Ambassador Kenneth T. Young's wife Patricia standing at the extreme right.

Knight Collection.

12), Mae Pon, Ban Mae La Laluang, Ban Mae La Noi, and Mae Sariang (Sierra-21). The trips were well planned and at least half the locations had rudimentary airports. In addition, fuel drums had been pre-positioned at all places for hand refueling.

Forewarned of the VIP trips, the Karen people were happy to host the distinguished visitors. They displayed cultural items and conducted tribal dances for the guests. Much like my trips in the northeast with Gordon Murchie, the government team distributed pictures of the King and Queen, Thai flags, and various other propaganda materials. A movie was also shown at one location.

Wayne enjoyed the trip and the RONs at Chiang Mai. The U.S. Consul there was a single man about Wayne's age. While in the city, he invited the Captain to his house for dinner, where they conducted good conversations and the Consul introduced Wayne to Allen Sherman's comic music. Wayne's excellent personality and winsome ways led to Mrs. Young sending him photographs a few weeks after the trip. He also formed a good relationship with the USIS Director that lasted several years. ⁴

COMMUNICATION

While Jim Spillis was working in the north, I continued to create tapes for home consumption on his recorder. Jim was considering leaving Air America, but thinking about first applying for a leave of absence, furlough, or leave without pay (LWOP). Therefore, during a recent shopping trip to Hong Kong, in addition to other items, he had purchased a tape recorder. Considered a high-tech electronic device at the time, many crewmembers corresponded with people in the States using tapes.

⁴ EW Knight Emails, 06/03/00, 02/12/01, 02/13/01, 02/16/01, 02/17/01.
Bill Young Interview.

It became a well-established process; for sixteen cents and the price of two stamps, one could forward twenty minutes of conversation to the folks through APO mail. Besides hearing a loved one's voice, a person could convey a lot of information in twenty minutes, especially if the message was organized beforehand. Since the Sony 521 tape deck I purchased at the U.S. Army Post Exchange in Okinawa was compatible with both recording and listening to tapes, I decided to utilize the procedure.⁵

Careful not to divulge too much sensitive information, which I did not possess anyway, I attempted to describe a typical mission:

"We are notified the night before." (The Volkswagen bus delivered the flight schedule as I was taping. People were so concentrated at that period it was easy to distribute the schedule to individuals' homes.) "...We arrive at the airfield one hour prior to scheduled take off time to load our gear, preflight, and gather our maps. Following this, we fly to Vientiane, shutdown to refuel, and walk to the mess hall for something to eat. Once the helicopter is loaded, we launch north where there are hundreds of sites. There we deliver rice and military gear from place to place while flying at a respectable altitude to avoid ground fire. The Meo are good fighters, but the Lao poor bug-outs. In the past, when engaged with enemy, White Star Special Forces personnel would look around and discover themselves the only participants in the conflict. The different factions trade with the other to continue the war."

I also mentioned that Abadie traveled to Taipei to receive a briefing on future Company plans relating to a continued helicopter operation and our First Officer status. The month of

⁵ Author Note: Although in poor condition, most of the taped exchanges survive today.

February marked my sixth month in Udorn and I decided to stick it out, as there were many rumors about the war starting up again. However, I wondered if health risks from indigenous diseases warranted remaining at the low pay scale.

Following twenty-one days off the flight schedule, I finally began flying again. However, this only involved a few day missions to the Sakon Nakhon-Nakhon Phanom region eighty-miles east of Udorn. One person in my passenger complement included a tall, thin engineer interested in reconnoitering and locating prime sites for future airstrips around the provincial city and at the base of the mountainous area. With Vietnamese or communist sympathizers residing there, the area had long been a hotbed of communist activity dating back decades when Ho Chi Minh and his cronies roamed the northeast, proselytizing and sowing seeds for the Thai Separatist Movement.

SEABEES AT NKP

In addition to providing more contact with the local people, the policy of expanding Helio Courier STOL airstrips throughout the Northeast could increase security for the Seabee Technical Assistance Teams (STAT) developing the new Nakhon Phanom airfield. ¹

During mid-1961 U.S. Naval commanders considered creating Seabee Technical Assistance Teams. These units would be tailored to provide technical assistance in socio-economic and military construction areas, gather field and engineering intelligence, and provide military and engineering support for other U.S. or friendly forces in selected countries.

By February 1962, reacting to the Kennedy Administration's belated emphasis on creating counterinsurgency forces, the units were authorized.

¹ During World War Two my Father attempted to enlist in the Seabees, but was rejected as being too old.

In May 1962, CINCPAC developed plans to staff, organize, and train four mobile construction teams by 1 October for Southeast Asia deployment. The Pacific Fleet's five mobile construction battalions would provide personnel for the new units. Each team would consist of thirteen individuals, including one Civil Engineering Corps junior grade officer. Six additional teams were envisioned operational by February 1963.

Largely because of the known presence of a Vietnamese logistical corridor in eastern Laos that supplied men and materiel to Viet Cong units in South Vietnam, with Thai government blessing, the "authorities" sanctioned construction of a strategic airfield at the Mekong River town of Nakhon Phanom 480 miles northeast of Bangkok. In late 1962, Detachment Yankee, from Okinawa-based U.S. Naval Mobile Construction Battalion Three (NMCB 3 called Seabees) was air lifted to Ubon, Thailand, and then trucked to Nakhon Phanom. After arrival, the unit scouted the area locations and planned to build a camp just west of the town to accommodate the large influx of personnel and equipment necessary for the huge undertaking. However, after deliberation and recommendations, because the proposed airfield was so close to Thakhet and areas previously targeted by communist artillery, U.S. leaders decided to begin construction at a more secure and defensible location nine miles west of the river. As conceived, the complex was to include a hundred-foot wide, 5,000-foot pierced steel planking (PSP) runway with 500-foot overruns. A parking area, a marshalling area, and a taxiway warm-up section rounded out plans. All work was scheduled for

completion by June 1963.²

Beginning on the sixth, Don Buxton, Flight Mechanic Ben Naval, and I flew to Ban Chap Pa Dong in Hotel Tango. The following day, crewing Hotel Lima, I journeyed to Ban Na Khu with Mike Marshall, Flight Mechanic Rick Decosta, and several officials from Sakon Nakhon. At first, without adequate maps, we had difficulty finding the site. Relying on my basic Thai skills, I told Mike to land near a village where I would inquire as to its location. The scheme was successful and friendly Thai villagers directed us to a large cull de sac valley on the south side of the sprawling Phu Phan Mountain area. Long considered an insurgent area, I had avoided over flying the Phu Phan Mountain range during my trip to this region while in the Crotch.

Attesting to the emphasis placed on the Nakhon Phanom region, five days later, I was scheduled to Ban Na Khu with Dick Elder and Rick Decosta in Hotel Mike. During the long day, which ultimately took us as far as Ubon, Dick, an avid reader consumed two books. I wondered how many other pilots engaged in this pastime while flying.

The following day Jack Connor and I flew to Ban Kut Rua, north of Sakon Nakhon, and several other sites, including the provincial capital at Nakhon Phanom. Called the city of mountains for obvious reasons, one could also see jungle clad mountains across the river beyond Thakhet. We also went to Ban Nong Hoi and Ban Phon Ton, both on the road south of Nakhon Phanom. I could only suppose that the stops were necessary to

² Edward Marolda and Fitzgerald, *U.S. Navy and the Vietnam Conflict: From Military Assistance to Combat 1959-1965*, 192.
Richard Tregaskis, *Southeast Asia: Building the Bases: The History of Construction in Southeast Asia* 1975
George Fowler, *Creating Nakhon Phanom RTAFB in 1962, The Mekong Express Mail*, December 2003, 8.



View from Nakhon Phanom across the Mekong, displaying the karsts outside Thakhet, Laos.

John Lesnak Collection.

gather local intelligence, continue looking for suitable STOL sites, and locations to support the new air base.

Except for one commissary run to Vientiane with Sam Jordon to help stock the Club and grocery store, my March flying was complete. I ended the period with less than half the previous month's flight time. Of course, the JUSMAG Bangkok aviation fuel shortage largely contributed to the problem, and I wondered how much lower the flight time would diminish.

Breaking my solitude and boredom, Spillis returned from his Northern Thailand trip. Soon afterward, he expressed a firm decision to leave Air America. After leaving Sunline Helicopters, where Jim had marked time awaiting recall to National Airlines, like most of us with Air America he sought money and adventure in Southeast Asia. Within six months, and 250 cockpit hours, he managed to fulfill half this goal. During that period, he experienced sufficient adventure, but the anticipated monetary aspect never materialized. Therefore, without burning any bridges, he had operations forward a message to Taipei headquarters requesting an indefinite leave of absence, with the option of returning to Air America pending an increase in flying commitments. Then he awaited a reply.

Following an absence of several days, Sang La returned to work with her three children in tow. Earlier, her youngest son had been ill with what looked to me like measles. I had recommended she take him to a doctor, but she refused. I supposed that a lack of confidence in physicians and the fact she only earned 300 baht (fifteen dollars) a month influenced her decision. However, even offering to pay the doctor's fee failed to change her mind. Therefore, I dispensed what poor advice I could about how to care for the child.

Directly after Chief Pilot Abadie returned from Taipei four pilots more were terminated. One of them was George "Pinky" Eaton. It came as no surprise to anyone, for some time before, Ab had made a statement that the Company wanted to weed out dead wood. More disconcerting, nasty rumors circulated that some of our H-34s would be returned to the USMC. This certainly was bad news. With the contract due for renegotiation and renewal at the

end of June, we logically anticipated that additional heads would roll.

Disturbing rumors spreading throughout the compound had a negative effect on our lives and attitudes. Increasingly, we were leery and suspicious of any input from management. Amid all this gloom and doom, the Club unofficially opened on a limited basis, and without many other activities to occupy us, a few of us congregated there in the morning swapping stories, trying to remain cool, and reassuring ourselves we were really not the dregs of humanity.

THE HELMET ILLUSION

The recent rash of two wheeled vehicle accidents often resulted in serious injuries to Air America personnel and family members. Therefore, at mid-month, former Marine Colonel J.P. McMahon, Company Southeast Asia Regional Director in Bangkok, distributed a helmet protection memorandum that included both drivers and passengers. Slated to become effective on 1 April, Ben Moore, under pressure from Taipei to implement the policy, recommended that all personnel immediately begin wearing headgear. The memorandum caused a stir among us because of the expense involved, the dilemma of actually obtaining a scarce helmet, the hot climate, and the plain cussedness of the edict that threatened disciplinary action or even termination for noncompliance.

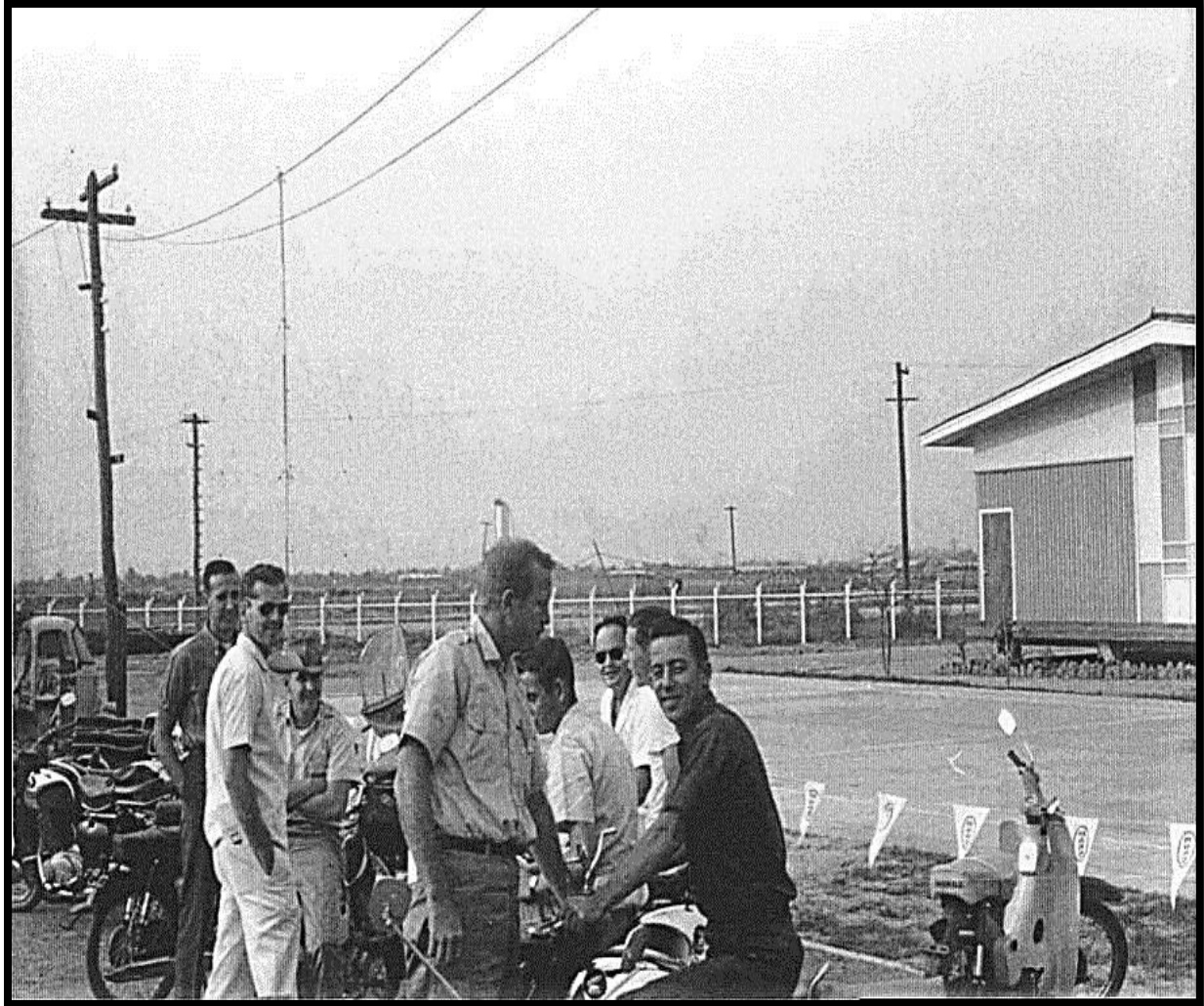
Since the memorandum indicated "suitable" and failed to specify the exact type of protection necessary, being very sophisticated thinking men, we improvised. Consequently, headgear varied widely. I wore my Navy issue flight helmet. Jim used his newer sound attenuating APH-5 that conformed to one's head and contained a full lining. Other versions were quite

innovative and humorous. Charlie Weitz, ever the clown and evoking a tacit rebellion, wore an aluminum cooking pot.

Wayne Knight stood alongside Moore when Charlie rode into the compound the first time with the metal container perched rakishly on his head. The sight was hilarious. Ben, wanting to be the stern boss, could barely contain himself and hurried into his office to avoid Charlie seeing him laugh. Inappropriate by even Ben's liberal standards, Charlie was cautioned about his loose interpretation of the memorandum, but the memory of the pot top became legendary. His next effort to poke fun at a system he considered unreasonable and faulty resulted in wearing a plastic white military helmet liner. Although not what management envisioned for true head protection, the device did save Weitz's bacon one afternoon when he pitched backwards off the drunken machine. After a short period, realizing that management was truly serious about the decree, all hands complied and the injury rate, particularly to heads, subsided.¹

Jim Spillis journeyed to Taipei onboard the "Golden Worm," believing the Company would grant him a leave of absence for an unspecified period. He calculated that the Company would issue a ninety percent discount airline ticket, and he would remain in the States until flying increased. Then he would reevaluate a return to Southeast Asia. However, he received a rude awakening when Company personnel replied that they had never heard of a leave of absence or leave without pay. After further discussion, they proposed that Jim terminate his employment, then apply for rehire should the situation dictate. Jim readily agreed, for the mutual plan included 2,000 dollars in base pay, additional leave

¹ RD/SEA, Regional Regulation 1-63 "Requirement for Wearing Protection Helmet When Riding 2-Wheeled Motor Vehicle" 16 Mar. 1963.
EW Knight Email.
Jim Spillis Interview.



A group of Air America pilots and Flight Mechanics in the two-wheeled vehicle designated parking area next to the volleyball court. Clockwise from the left rear: standing Scratch Kanach, Elmer Munsell, Gene Lloyd, Bill Ellingsworth, Herb Baker, Author partially hidden, Dan "Red" Alston, and Howard Estes.

Nick Burke Collection, March 1963.

pay, allowances, and tickets.

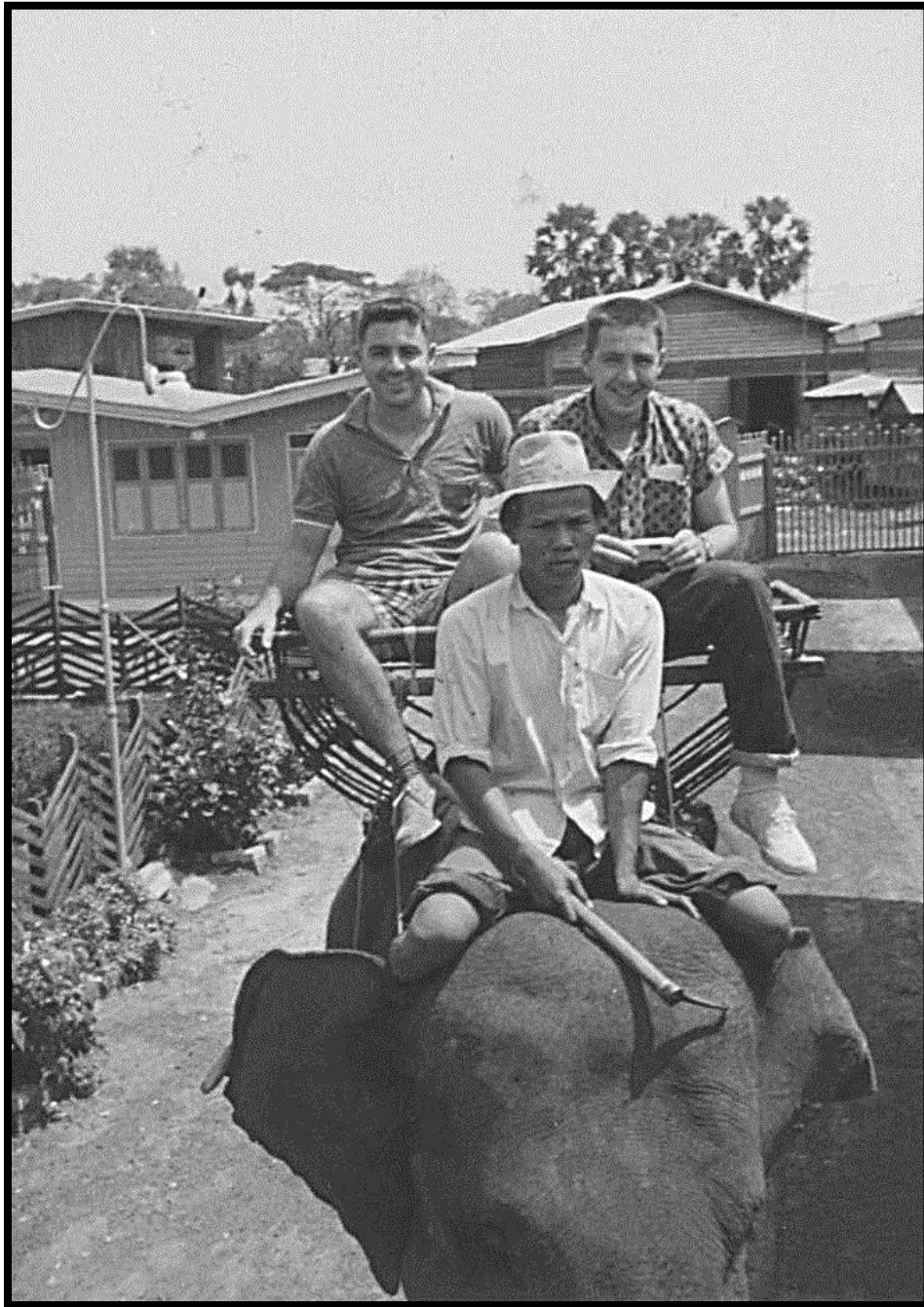
Jim returned to Udorn in order to organize his affairs and conduct a leisurely check out. He mentioned seeing Herb Baker in Taipei and launching on a visit to one of the mountain pleasure palaces above the city. During the trip to Taiwan, Jim purchased a pair of lacquer ware trays and charged me with having them forwarded to his Miami residence. He packed a small household shipment, which included the tape recorder. Therefore, when a tape arrived from home, I had to search the town to find compatible electronics to listen to it. I found one at Joe Marlin and John Timmons house at Asian Acres, where we had previously ridden the elephants. Jim sold his Honda bike and gave away his uniforms and helmet, a good sound-attenuating one with full liner that conformed to a pilot's swelled head. When I informed Sang La that Jim was leaving shortly, tears welled up in her eyes, for Jim honestly liked her and even presented her with his blankets. ²

THIN ICE

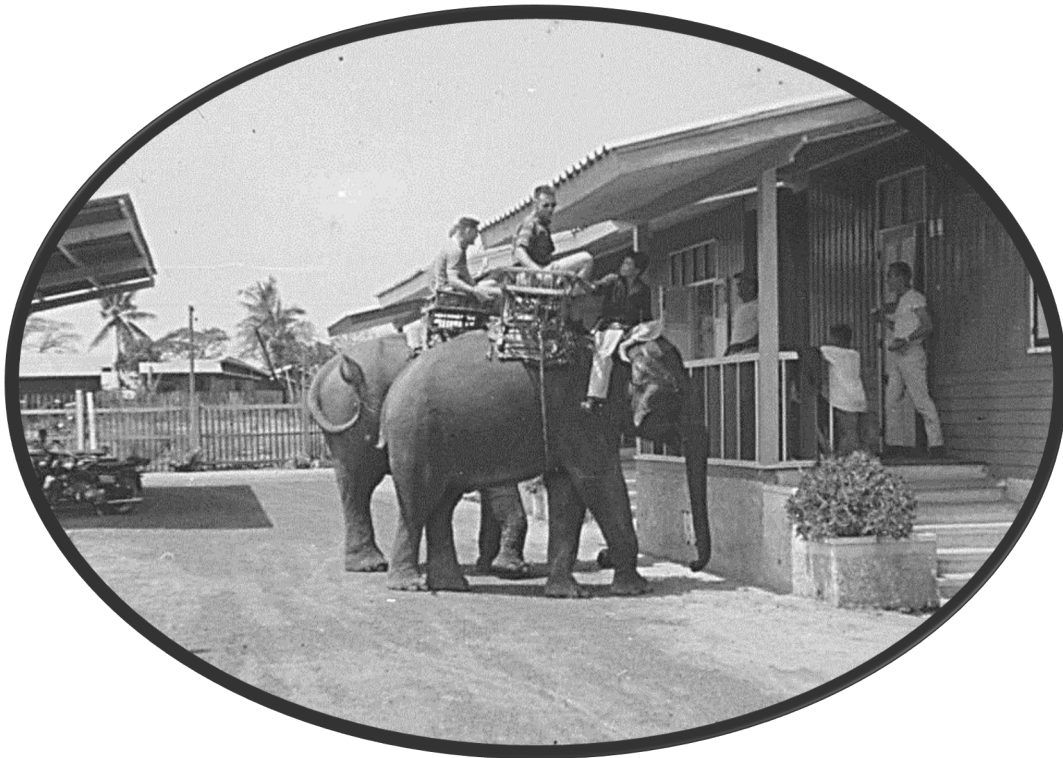
While Jim was still away in Taipei, the morning coffee and cigarette gathering evolved into a "rumor-a-day club." Dominated by alpha-pack members like Dan Alston, Bill Cook, and other vocal and verbose members, it was thought that harmless rumors might be amusing and counter the rumor mill believed to be emanating from management.

Before long, someone informed me that Ben Moore wanted to talk to me ASAP in his new office, located in the smaller "L" shaped portion of the Club that contained a bathroom and transient bedrooms. Naturally, I was surprised and curious, for

² Jim Spillis Interview, 02/09/97.



Bearded Author wearing the uniform of the day with H-34 Flight
Mechanic Joe Marlin at the Asian Acres compound.
Jim Spillis Collection.



Author and Jim Spillis aboard separate Southeast Asian beasts of burden at Asian Acres.

Spillis Collection.

I had no idea what he wanted. Moreover, never on the gruff Captain's good buddy list, I was generally uncomfortable in the exalted man's presence. I never conducted much dialogue with him except for a few casual words in passing like, "*Hello, Mister Moore.*"

I tentatively entered the office and stood tall in front of the authoritarian's desk, just as I had been taught when in the presence of military superiors. I instantly realized from his serious demeanor that something was out of the ordinary. Without pausing to sugar coat his presentation, Ben calmly explained in his laconic Texas drawl that a rumor had spread into town from employees specifying that Air America was soon going out of business. This rumor greatly distressed several landlords who foresaw revenue loss and were asking Ben hard questions. After checking into the source of the story, he traced the disconcerting rumor back to pilots. Some unspecified person had implicated me. Then, changing pace, in a stern voice, he wanted to know if I had started the rumor, or knew who had passed it to me. The accusation was unexpected. Shocked and embarrassed, I could not think straight, much less recall the rumor, any details, or any principals in question. Moreover, I certainly was not innovative enough to have conceived and perpetrated such an interesting rumor. Generally, just wanting company, I listened to the storytellers and rumormongers converse over coffee. Still, it was obvious that someone had fingered me, perhaps eliciting the cliché of guilt by association. Even though I wondered who had proffered my name, I did not want to incriminate any peers. Let Moore's investigation reveal that. However, with Ben's power to terminate me, and under intense pressure, I was well aware that I had to quickly cobble together a suitable name or my present Air America employment was history. Therefore, not recalling if he might have actually

passed the rumor, aware that he was leaving Air America and could not be hurt, I blurted out one word: **Spillis**. Ben did not say anything, but my declaration seemed to satisfy Ben in his ongoing witch hunt for the perpetrator, and I was summarily dismissed.

I left the boss's office confused and flushed with doubt about peer loyalty, wondering which Company spy had dropped a nickel on me. Furthermore, at a time when we presumed that management earnestly searched for people to terminate, I harbored little optimism regarding my longevity. Learning fast about self-serving pilot treachery, it became more obvious to me that the squadron-college fraternity spirit and camaraderie I had envisioned when joining Air America would never achieve fruition.³

After Ben dismissed me from the inquisition, I left immediately for the house to inform Jim about the flap. After explaining my action implicating him, he merely laughed, seemingly not disturbed at all by my accusation. He indicated that he probably would have been involved if in the area. No one ever queried Spillis as to participation in the rumor mill episode. That marked the final time I discussed or heard any information concerning the incident. Still, I walked on eggs very quietly for a time.

Not at all comfortable about the situation, I elected to temporarily leave town for STO in Bangkok. After meeting Fairy and deciding that Bangkok was too hot, we decided to drive a rented vehicle to the seaside resort at Pattaya. Although cooler than Bangkok in March, few people patronized the beautiful

³ Author Note: I was not aware at the time that Captain Moore was a very fair person and would not have fired any pilot without first discussing a problem with the CPH.

unspoiled clean beach area, particularly during the week. With only a small town, no hotels, and accommodations only available in private homes, much of the area charm emanated from the remote location. Just to the south, past road's end, lay property reserved for the King. With vacation houses scattered throughout the country, the monarch and his family rarely journeyed there and access to the area was generally not restricted. I originally planned to share a house with Wayne and Lai Knight and others. However, following one peek at the squad bay type sleeping arrangements, Fairy objected and we found another more private place. Perhaps it was a girl thing. Over the next few enjoyable days, my muscles became very stiff and sore from uncustomary water skiing.

Before leaving Bangkok for Udorn, we viewed *The Ugly American*, a recently-released movie in one of the city's impressive wide-screened theaters. I was surprised to see my Mother's silver-haired cousin, Judson Lair, acting in a minor role portraying the gray-haired ambassador.

CLUB

With the inception of the new Club, those in upper and second tier management were highly interested in viewing facility improvements and expanding creature comforts. While I was away licking my wounds, drawn like bees to honey, on the 22nd, Managing Director George Doole, Chairman of the Pacific Corporation Board of Directors; Vice President of Operations, Robert Rousselot; and Regional Director Jack McMahon arrived. Four days later, retired Admiral Felix B. Stump, Chairman of the Pacific Corporation board, visited the facility. In addition, management types from Vientiane including Regional Chief Pilot Fred Walker, Jack Leister, and Dave Hickler, who would soon replace Station Manager, Frank Stitt, and other equally curious

individuals, found their way to our digs. During the day, Ben Moore played host. After a station tour and detailed status report, they enjoyed lunch in the dining room facility of the new Club, which was still called the Recreation Club. ⁴

At night, Bonnie Coble became Captain Moore's official hostess. Bonnie's talent for providing Chinese food was renowned as the most delicious around, and guests consumed considerable amounts at these affairs. Jim, on the lowest end of the pecking order among the high-strokers, served as bartender. He became famous for his ersatz dry martini formula. Ben bragged about them following every event, and drinkers concurred. They were not aware that Jim never owned a vermouth bottle. His secret was ice cold gin with an olive. After dinner, Ben distributed cigars and Jim served fine Napoleon cognac brandy. For hours, the guests talked, smoked, sipped the brandy, and commented about how good it tasted. What they failed to observe was that after finishing the first bottle, Jim refilled the brandy bottle from one-gallon jugs of Christian Brothers rotgut. As long as he dispensed drinks from the original bottle, the "fine cognac" represented something to be sipped and savored. ⁵

⁴ Ben Moore March 1963 Monthly Report.

⁵ Jim Coble Emails, 03/16/02, 03/29/02.

As the month of March concluded, following serious acrimony and shooting incidents between factions on the Plain of Jars, military and political storm clouds that had been gathering for months began to darken even more. According to a *Bangkok Post* article, *Guns Point at SEA*, during a four-day resumption of fighting between Kong Le's troops and the dissenting pro-Pathet Lao Neutralists under Colonel Deuane, several soldiers were killed around Khang Khay, and another one died following a nasty brawl in the Xieng Khouang market.¹ To me, the extraordinary number of deaths cited seemed totally unrealistic for the low-key Lao Theater.

Because of March action on the Plain of Jars, stateside speculation and opinion was expressed regarding the Lao state of affairs. A 10 March newspaper article assessing the Southeast Asian situation stated that during their sixteen-year history, communist guerrillas of Ho Chi Minh's Lao Dong party had generally chosen to escape detection when possible. In addition, following many months of strenuous effort, they had been largely unsuccessful in dislodging Meo guerrilla fighters from positions held within enemy occupied territory. The Pathet Lao hierarchy preferred a mobile war, in which they could easily disappear, rather than a static war.

Following implementation of the six-month Geneva-guaranteed Lao coalition government, Hanoi leaders perceived that they were on the cusp of nationalist sentiment in Indochina. The forces, which had eliminated French rule, would do the same to the Americans. Cleansing was already underway in Laos with the

¹ Toye, Hugh *Laos: Buffer State or Battleground*, (New York: Oxford, 1968) 191.

formation of a coalition government. The Lao settlement exacted a toll on Western interests. While the Vietnamese considered their efforts to be proceeding as planned, U.S. policy appeared disorganized and confusing to the West. Moreover, the Neutralist agreement left communist military forces in an advantageous position just across the border, ready to react or attack with few U.S. countermeasures in place. ²

In an attempt to describe and explain the convoluted situation, CIA memorandums, letters, and publications related to the period stated that the lull following the Geneva Accords signing was briefly violated several times in early 1963 during Meo and Pathet Lao skirmishes.

From the beginning of the three-faction system in Laos, Neutralists were targeted and courted, both militarily and politically, by both Pathet Lao and Rightists, to join their side. Like a pickle in the center of a bun, the Neutralist military did not enjoy identical arms support from major powers favoring both Rightist and Pathet Lao armies. In addition, Pathet Lao and Rightist police vied for support of Neutralist villagers. Political maneuvering in Vientiane focused on drawing Neutralist leaders into the web of either the right or left. Therefore, Pathet Lao intrigues and Souvanna Phouma's tentative leadership thwarted progress toward a lasting Neutralist solution. Since June, firm agreements concerning neutrality had existed in Vientiane, but these pacts rarely extended to the provinces. In fact, access to enemy territory, especially Sam Neua, was adamantly denied ICC representatives or Lao government officials.

² Newark (New Jersey) *Sunday News* article, *Southeast Asia: Multi Headed Tiger*, 03/10/63.

Efforts by the leftist faction to consolidate and expand power, while attempting to influence Kong Le to abandon Souvanna Phouma and his government, were made at the expense of the Neutralists. While supported by a great number of North Vietnamese cadres and advisors, Pathet Lao pressure on Neutralist forces centered on the strategic Plain of Jars in northeast Laos, location of Kong Le's headquarters and the presence of several thousand troops. The situation there had been tense for weeks with both parties vying for control, and it was deemed that such incidents might initiate full-scale hostilities.

Since the previous fall, Pathet Lao leaders, supported by a readily assessable logistics base in adjacent North Vietnam and numerous cadre stiffeners who firmly dictated communist policy, waged a vigorous campaign to undermine Kong Le's political and military position. The mixed effort of subversion and coercion achieved some success in confusing and corrupting opinions within Neutralist ranks.

Over time, the flow of supplies from Hanoi to Kong Le's army dwindled appreciably, and Pathet Lao interdiction of aerial supplies continued to be a serious threat, as was graphically demonstrated by the November downing of an Air America C-123. These pressures inevitably fostered a guarded cooperative trend between Neutralist and Rightist factions.

The Pathet Lao tug of war within the Neutralist army achieved some success. Earlier, consistent with their subversive manipulations, the communists recruited Kong Le's second in command, Colonel Deuane, who formed a minority pro-NHLS dissident element. Pro-Neutralist officers and political officials were assassinated, and through Colonel Deuane's manipulations, new attempts continued to persuade Kong Le's garrison forces to defect. Furthermore, Souvanna Phouma's

failure to demonstrate firm resolve over overt Pathet Lao actions initiated criticism of his wisdom and leadership by Neutralist leaders. However, so as not to compromise the Prime Minister's sole power base, Kong Le and a great majority of his men remained loyal to the Neutralist government.

This scenario presented an unusual situation. During the fluid state of affairs, Kong Le had only six months previously avidly expressed the communist line. Currently, he earnestly purged Pathet Lao from his army, arrested some, and transferred others. With communist provisions to his forces curtailed, he requested the Lao Army and the U.S. to supply him with military goods. Hoping to improve his defensive position, through the auspices of the Lao government, he appealed for an airlift from Vientiane using ICC, American, and Soviet planes. He also initiated steps to strengthen his defensive positions on the Plain of Jars by further concentrating troops north and west of the Xieng Khouang airfield, and began construction of a fallback position to the south at Moung Phanh (Victor-106) should leftist elements elect to overrun his troops.

Exacerbating the faltering Lao situation, on April Fool's Day leftist Neutralist Foreign Minister Quinim Pholsena was about to enter his villa at 2130 hours after attending a diplomatic reception. He had accompanied King Savang Vatthana and Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma to Washington in late February. Now he was machine-gunned to death by a Neutralist Armed Forces (Forces Armees Neutralistes or FAN) bodyguard. The act was most certainly sanctioned by Kong Le, and committed in retaliation for Colonel Ketsana's February murder on the Plain of Jars. The perpetrator, enlisted man Chy Kong, later claimed that Quinim was attempting to overthrow Souvanna's government and bribe FAN officers to defect to the communist cause. Long a prime target, Quinim was indeed instrumental in directing agents

to subvert Kong Le's susceptible officers and assassinate those who continued to be loyal.

Alarmed over the incident and citing a lack of security in the capital, almost all senior Pathet Lao and leftist Neutralist officials, including Prince Souphanouvong, departed Vientiane for the safety of Khang Khay. On the third, one of Kong Le's intelligence officers was discovered murdered. The round of pay-back assassinations continued when, nine days later, a Quinim adherent, leftist Neutralist police Colonel Khanti Siphatong, who was slated for the police chief position, was shot in the head at his Vientiane home. Similar murders continued throughout 1963 and into 1964. Despite appeals from USG, the Geneva Accords Cochairman, and the ICC, Neo Lao Hak (S) Xat (NHL) ministers refused to return to Vientiane. ³

MR-2 ESCALATION

At first Quinim's assassination seemingly impeded Pathet Lao and communist plans to introduce a "true Neutralist" faction and gain control of Laos. In addition, it came at a time of great anxiety on the Plain of Jars, especially since Vang Pao's scattered intelligence agents reported a North Vietnamese incursion.

On 2 April, a fresh Vietnamese division entered Laos on Route-7 at Barthelemy Pass and arrived at Nong Het (VS-03). With no resistance to slow them, they quickly moved southwest along the dry road. By the 5th, enemy elements captured Ban Lat Boua

³ Norman Hannah, *The Key to Failure* (Lanham: Madison, 1987) 62-63.
Fox, *Politics, Economics and Society: Political History of the Lao State* (London: Pinter Publication, 1986) 28, 29.
CIA Information Report, 04/02/63.
Time Magazine, After the Party, 04/12/63, Internet.

(Nagoya), a strategic Route-71/74 junction located on the northern Plain.

The same day, after establishing southern road blocks along Route-4 to prevent FAN reinforcements arrival from Tha Thom, Pathet Lao troops commenced artillery offenses against Xieng Khouang Ville (Lima-03). The Neutralists based there, claiming only two days food and ammunition remaining, slowly withdrew west toward the Plain of Jars. With the town abandoned, the following day enemy units continued to attack Kong Le's scattered outposts in the extended valley. On 7 April, FAR held towns at Lat Houang (Site-09) and Lat Sene (later numbered LS-276), located near the mouth of the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley fell, but, were recaptured the same day.

Brief fighting had previously occurred between Kong Le's men and the left-leaning Deuanists. However, serious escalation arose when mortar and artillery rounds splashed in and around Xieng Khouang Ville during the early morning hours of 4 April, killing and injuring many civilians. Changing tactics, the communists moved to establish full military control over positions jointly held by Pathet Lao and Neutralist units. Before the end of the first week in April, Pathet Lao elements launched surprise attacks on Neutralist PDJ sites. They eventually forced Kong Le's troops to abandon their positions at Khang Khay's FAN headquarters (VS-08), Phong Savan, communist headquarters for Military Region Two (Lima-21), the Ban Ban Valley, and Xieng Khouang Ville, as they gradually begin relocating west to regroup at Moung Phanh (Lima-106). During orderly retreats, the troops departed with most of their heavy weapons and tanks. ⁴

⁴ Over a three-month period, Lak Sao (VS-49), Nhommarath, Mahaxay (Lima-57), and Moung Phine fell to the enemy in Military Region Three.

While Neutralist forces still held portions in the Vang Vieng area, Colonel Deuane rotated his staff to Khang Khay to control rebel FAN units, and formed The New Patriotic Neutralists.

Communist attacks on FAN troops may have backfired, for the aggression tended to shift both the Prime Minister and Kong Le closer to USG and FAR chief Phoumi Nosavan. Pathet Lao attacks and continued threats against Kong Le's inferior forces caused the little general to again reconsider FAN's loose and unrewarding communist alignment. On the same day that his forces were pummeled on the eastern Plain, Kong Le, concerned FAN would soon lose all their Plain of Jars sites, requested Souvanna Phouma to release six FAR battalions to reinforce his army. Souvanna, concerned about political ramifications in the coalition government, and lack of tight control over the situation, initially hesitated to act on the request. Instead, he requested both Soviet and British Ambassadors, representatives of Geneva Conference Co-Chairmen, and members of the International Control Commission, to intercede in the thorny situation. Despite appeals from the Prime Minister, the unproductive and ineffective ICC failed to investigate the Plain of Jars fracas.

Earlier in the year, the USG Administration voiced concern about Meo ability to hold and survive in the enemy-controlled eastern sector of Xieng Khouang Province. Because of a distinct danger to the people and to supply aircraft, there was some discussion about having the people evacuate from harm's way. However, this was scotched when it was recognized that the Meo were a valuable intelligence source, and that relocating them would create a huge void in Military Region Two information. Furthermore, Meo guerrillas were also deemed instrumental in the

Neutralist's ability to fend off a major enemy attack on the Plain of Jars.

Fearing a future loss of the PDJ, during Mid-January Phoumi Nosavan encouraged Vang Pao to cooperate with Kong Le and integrate with his men when necessary. Despite a traditional and long-standing mutual distrust between Neutralist and Meo soldiers, Vang Pao considered his commander's entreaty. After further consideration, the Meo officer, obligated to Phoumi for his people's survival during the 1960-1961 crunch, opted to go slow in cooperating too closely with the Neutralists.

Eventually, Kong Le, with Washington's concurrence and the blessings of both Souvanna Phouma and the U.S. Mission, envisioned a need for a joint Plain of Jars command and military action should the Pathet Lao initiate an even greater offensive thrust. He began informal defensive contingency plans in cooperation with right-wing military elements. Additionally, in order to establish a semblance to a balance of power on the PDJ, full cooperation was deemed necessary between Vang Pao and Kong Le.

On 11 April, Vang Pao flew to Kong Le's headquarters to parlay. Since time was considered essential, the following day the FAN general journeyed to Sam Tong to present his agenda. At the refugee site an agreement was struck for Meo troops to don FAN uniforms and move onto the Plain to reinforce Kong Le's headquarters, thus allowing the Neuts to battle the easternmost entrenched Pathet Lao. Major strategy primarily involved immediate activation and deployment of FAR Colonel Vang Pao's Meo guerrilla units to high ground along the perimeter of the PDJ and portions of Route-4 overlooking major PL/NVA positions. There was no authorization for offensive operations at this time.

Meo movement and occupation of choice real estate forced the communists to create additional defensive postures. This likely abrogated their near-term tactical planning, for within two days a ceasefire commenced, greatly reducing area tensions for a short period.

However, despite these stopgap measures, General Phoumi expected an eventual collapse of the coalition government and another confrontation between factions.

On the 10th, during a lunchtime NSC meeting, CIA Director McCone presented a synopsis of current Lao intelligence. Citing a disclaimer, he noted that the information relied largely on Kong Le sources and might contain considerable hyperbole.

State Department Under Secretary Harriman then proposed several options calculated to end Plain of Jars hostilities. He recommended that USG continue to supply Kong Le and Meo units surrounding the Plain of Jars; to encourage the British to pressure the Soviets to influence the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese leaders to terminate attacks; to insist that the French military mission support both Kong Le and Phoumi forces; to continue contingency plans to introduce U.S. forces into Thailand if necessary; to consider overtly using Rightist forces at a later time; and to use the ICC and the Lao King's influence to halt attacks. President Kennedy supported Harriman's recommendations.

Premier Souvanna Phouma was planning a visit to the Plain of Jars on the 14th to seek agreement between Kong Le, dissident Neutralist leader Colonel Deuane, and Pathet Lao military commander Singkapo for a temporary ceasefire leading to a negotiated settlement.

Prior to the visit, Souvanna sent letters to Kong Le and Colonel Deuane urging reconciliation in line with his efforts to

overcome the disunity in Neutralist ranks which the Pathet Lao was exploiting.

The meeting took place on the Plain of Jars as scheduled. In addition to the three factions present, "Souvanna was accompanied by Deputy Premier Souphanouvong, the three ICC commissioners, and the British and Soviet ambassadors as representatives of the Geneva cochairmen..."⁵

Also during mid-month, Souvanna cycled requests through the U.S. Embassy for vehicles, signal equipment, weapons, and ammunition to support Kong Le. Ten tons of supplies were subsequently ferried to the Plain of Jars by RLAF C-47s during the week of 21 April.

With pent up vigor unleashed, Vang Pao's guerrillas recovered Padong, which had largely been a no-mans-land since being abandoned during early June 1961. Attesting to Meo prowess when employed properly in an operation thought to be worthwhile, by mid-July Vang Pao's guerrillas had reclaimed all outposts lost over the previous fourteen months.

As scattered FAN units slowly withdrew toward the western portion of the Plain of Jars, plans were underway for interdiction of major supply arteries to buy additional time to consolidate. Implementing this strategy, by 24 April sizeable Meo units had cratered sections of the eastern part of Route-7 in three places. It was the second such attempt to temporarily halt supply traffic from North Vietnam, as a less ambitious operation was conducted about the time of the Geneva Accords signing in 1962. The Route-4 valley leading to Xieng Khouang Ville was also interdicted. Doing what they were best equipped

⁵ Central Intelligence Bulletin, Daily Brief, Laos, 04/15/63.

to perform, Meo troops ambushed and harassed the enemy in the area.⁶

⁶ Various sources were used in this segment:
Ambassador M. Godley, *Lao Crisis* 447, Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Country Series, Laos. Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency, 03/29/63.
Ibid 490, 11/01/63.
CIA Information Report, Major General Ouan Rathikoun's Comments regarding the Xieng Khouang Province Situation, 04/08/63.
Douglas Blaufarb.
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 98, 99.
Vietnam War: The Documents, National Security Council Meeting, 04/10/63, (<http://mcadama.posc.mu.edu/viet6.htm>).
Victor Anthony, *The War in Northern Laos*, 81.
Tom Ahern, 147-154.

The day of Quinim's murder, when Jim Spillis left Udorn for Bangkok, Mike Marshall, Blackie Mondello, and I crewed Hotel Tango on a day mission to Ubon RTAFB (Sierra-19). Before returning home after the assignment, I positioned on the left side of the helicopter with a fire bottle while Mike prepared to start the engine. While depressing the starter and primer button, he added too much fuel which caused a large fireball, called a hang fire, to belch from the exhaust stacks. I became excited, jumping up and down, giving the engine cut sign (a right-handed movement across the throat), and shouted to shut down the engine. After he secured the magneto switch, I realized that I had given him with the wrong instructions, which should have included continuing turning the engine over to draw the fire back into the cylinders. With some reflection, he also realized that the wrong procedure was used and proceeded to chew me out.

BANGKOK MISSIONS

With the H-34 fuel shortage seemingly resolved at JUSMAAG, we returned to Bangkok. Despite numerous complaints from crews about continuing forced stays at the Plaza Hotel, and sequestration of our station provisional allowance for the time spent there, the mandatory housing situation remained the same.

During the following two weeks, we largely conducted joint Thai-American Special Forces skydiving jumps and people-to-people programs in towns well west of Bangkok.

On the fourth, I flew with Captain Bill Zeitler and Flight Mechanic Stan Wilson in Hotel-14. The mission took us sixty-five miles west of Bangkok close to the Burma border. Culled from a best seller by Pierre Bouille, the Kanchanaburi area was the

actual "Railroad of Death" location, but not the same one portrayed in the entertaining movie, *The Bridge Over the River Kwai*, which was filmed in Ceylon, but historically centered on Thailand.

At this point, I had worked the Bangkok region more than any other individual helicopter pilot, and consequently was familiar with the navigation to many provinces and cities. Therefore, I increasingly resented my First Officer status and de facto task of shepherding others around the area. However, Bill, who was both entertaining and knowledgeable, proved an affable person with whom to fly. He also had familiarity in a flight realm where I had little experience. After a stiff wind gust raised the nose of our aircraft slightly, requiring forward cyclic to level and stabilize the ship, he related an account about encountering severe blade stall while flying in Laos. The H-34 had pitched up so violently at the time that he nearly lost control before applying appropriate action. Following his narration of the incident, I made a mental note to try and avoid exceeding VNE and other such parameters leading to a stall condition.¹

Following the main road while lumbering west, we passed the huge golden domed Pra Pathom Jedi at Nakhon Pathom, where Buddhism was initially introduced to the Thai people. Soaring 380 feet above ground, constituting the world's tallest Buddhist monument, one could observe the structure glinting in the sun for many miles.

¹ Author Note: Though aviators are proud and egotistic individuals, most are properly disposed to learn something new about flying from a respected fellow aviator. Those unwilling to heed good advice generally ended up in the dust bin of history.

VNE: Speed never to exceed.



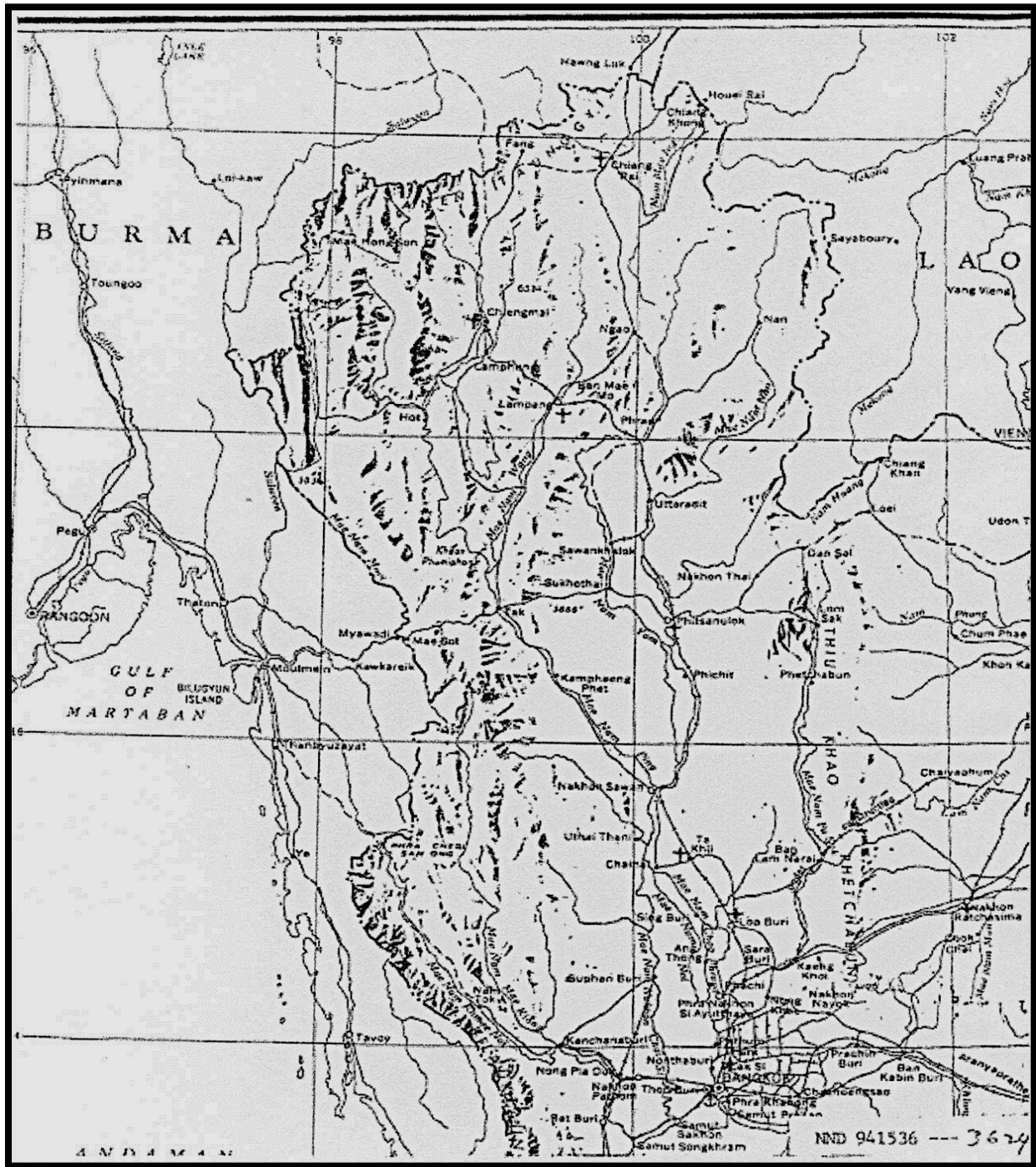
Golden domed wat at Nakhon Pathom, Thailand, visible from the highway to Kanchanaburi.

Postcard in Author's possession.

Well to the north-northeast, two tributaries, the Khwae (Kwai) Noi and Khwae Yai (respectively small and large), paralleled each other and joined near Kanchanaburi to form the Mae-Klong River. There King Rama Three created the new town of Kanchanaburi in 1833. Considered one of the most picturesque Thai provinces, waterfalls and broad fertile valleys characterized the surrounding countryside. The province also contained wild jungle, great forests, rugged hills, and numerous limestone caves once inhabited by Neolithic man. Discovery of prehistoric burial grounds during World War Two established a definite cultural relationship between the ancient peoples of Thailand and Malaysia. In addition, at a high cost in lives, a railroad bridge over the "Kwai" was erected by forced multi-national prisoner of war (POW) labor to connect the valleys of the Kwai Yai and Kwai Noi. At the town, one graveyard later consolidated graves of British, Dutch, Indian, and Australian prisoners who died during construction. ²

After refueling and loading a development and joint Special Forces team, we proceeded fifty miles north along the Khwae Yai river valley to the village of Si Sawat. To our west, a continuous mountain chain extending south from the Himalayas formed a natural geographic boundary between Burma and Thailand. Elevations varied from 1,800 feet at Kanchanaburi and soared to 6,500 feet in the northern reaches. While officials parlayed and tried to gain the peoples' confidence, we took the jump team aloft to conduct a skydiving demonstration. Because of a weight factor, I remained on the ground during one run and observed how the people loved seeing their troops jump in camouflaged uniforms. I rarely saw so many happy faces.

² The Official Thai Yearbook 1968.



Thai topographic map displaying a virtually unbroken mountain chain extending south from China to the Malay Peninsula and forming the Burma-Thai border. An intricate river system flowing from northern Thailand to the Bangkok area contributed to the fertile central growing area.

CIA Map downloaded from the Internet 04/12/00.

The following day, Bill and I stood by at Don Muang Airfield the entire day without being tapped for a mission. After lunch, we were taking some fresh air outside the terminal when two large Brits passed by en route to their aircraft. People on the observation deck happily waved and shouted to their friends below when one disgruntled Brit turned to the other uttering, "*Stinking Thais.*" Bill and I looked at each other dumbfounded. *What could these affable and gentle people have done to anger the uncouth Westerners?*

When my Captain rotated back to Udorn, replacement PIC Charlie Weitz and I went northwest of Bangkok and north of Prachinburi (Sierra-31) to support another joint Thai-American special forces skydiving mission at Nakhon Nayok. We conducted all jumps from 8,000 feet for optimum safety, and then, circling down, trailed the jumpers to the ground.

Commensurate with JUSMAG tradition, we enjoyed a day off on Sunday. For entertainment, a few of us went to a watering hole in the Sukhumvit Road area for a different venue than the bars on Patpong Road. After partying a little, we hired a three-wheeled motorized Tuc Tuc for an inexpensive and leisurely ride to the Plaza. The vehicle barely accommodated three Americans in the rear compartment, but we managed in squeeze onto the bench seat. Traffic was relatively light on Sunday and the horrendous vehicle problems to be encountered in future years were relatively non-existent. While we surged into the lobby, Charlie gave the driver what he considered a fair price. Apparently, the amount was far from sufficient, for the angry driver followed us into the hotel and began raising hell in Thai. Charlie ignored him, and after a prolonged interval, he left mumbling to himself about cheap Americans.



Thai three wheeled taxi for hire--called the Tuc Tuc.
Author Collection.

HOTEL FOXTROT

While we were having fun in Bangkok, an upcountry incident occurred on the seventh that left a bad taste in all our mouths. While working out of Sam Tong on contract 1674, Captain Bill Cook, First Officer Dick Todd, and Flight Mechanic Joe Marlin crashed Hotel Foxtrot on a grass-covered slope northeast of Sam Tong. Marlin suffered a minor back injury. One version of the accident alleged that late in the day, with Todd at the controls, northwesterly winds trapped the ascending aircraft in a severe downdraft, causing it to slam into the 5,500-foot ridge.

Further muddying the waters, rumor and bar talk revealed conflicting information. Few believed that Todd, a fellow First Officer, was actually flying that day. Individuals who knew and had previously associated with Todd in the U.S. Army, indicated that he was an excellent pilot, far too experienced and proficient an H-34 pilot to commit such a costly mistake. Many who were jaded by Bill Cook's previous hyperbole and antics believed Bill was at the controls of Hotel Foxtrot that day, and paid Todd a tidy sum to maintain silence and assume responsibility for the accident. The truth was never resolved, but several facts pointed to that scenario.

Dick Todd, a heavy gambler, frequently lost sizeable sums, and owed Charlie Weitz considerable money. Before the accident, Dick had attempted to solicit funds from friends to depart Southeast Asia. People noted that when he left Air America, Todd seemingly had plenty of money, paid off some of his debts, and departed Udorn with an enigmatic smile on his face. However, Weitz, ever a vocal individual, let it be known that Dick still owed him several thousand dollars. With many still scratching

their heads over the incident, Abadie gave Cook the benefit of the doubt and he soon flew again. ³

Like many shadowy accidents, the official version later specified that an engine power loss had resulted in the crash.

While John Aspinwall and his recovery team labored to disassemble and salvage what they could from Hotel Foxtrot, Wayne Knight departed Udorn in a helicopter for Site-20 on a four-day RON to supplement Aspinwall's group and retrieve Hotel Foxtrot. During this period, working from Long Tieng (then known as Site-98) he also supplied old Momentum sites at Tha Lin Noi (VS-18) on the northeastern fringe of the Plain of Jars, and Moung Oum (VS-22) in the valley immediately east of Phu Bia.

On 21 April, Wayne began ferrying Hotel Foxtrot parts and components to Sam Tong. Working at low fuel state, he noted powerful westerly upslope winds of at least thirty knots that allowed him to hover at only twenty-nine inches of manifold pressure. This outstanding aircraft performance only fueled additional speculation of how any aircraft could run into the ground with such strong upslope winds. Later, alluding to some heavy skullduggery, Flight Mechanic Joe Marlin promised to divulge the full story of the accident to Wayne, but never did. With Aspinwall filming the lift, not encountering much of a challenge, Wayne lifted the fuselage and slung it five minutes to Sam Tong for a fixed wing to ferry it to Udorn. With equal ease, he retrieved the engine the following day.

Pieces of Foxtrot remained in the hangar for many months awaiting disposition and the Maintenance Department's ability to

³ Author Note: In recent years CJ Abadie told me that he and Bill Cook were related by marriage in the Laplace area of Louisiana west of New Orleans. However, this was not the case at the time of this accident.



Northern ridgeline overlooking the Sam Tong Valley. Hotel Foxtrot crash occurred north of this ridge. A distinctive karst dominates the Site-20 valley center. Refugee villages are located on the near side of the photo. Pop's USAID warehouse is situated near the karst.

Marshall Collection.

rebuild severely damaged H-34s. For some time, crewmembers starved for flight time, felt the loss of Hotel Foxtrot. ⁴

Barry Cox, Ben Naval, and I RON at historic Kanchanaburi on the ninth. During the day, we followed abandoned railroad tracks, barely visible in the dense jungle, north northwest into the Kwaie Noi River Valley to the town of Thong Phaphum. During the mission, we landed on a high sloping finger close to the border, at one of the numerous tin mines in the area where the chief manager of the operation had shot himself only two hours previously. While we waited for our passengers to investigate, I gazed in wonder at the Lapland-like scene and tall lush grass waving in our downwash. It was hard to believe that this entire area contained so many semi-precious sapphire mines that fed the Thai jewelry market to satisfy an insatiable tourist market for the beautiful stylized rings. When our people returned, they reported that the late manager had mental problems and had suffered from severe depression, likely fostered by the remoteness, isolation, and solitude of the job. Late in the day, we serviced a Border Police camp in the rough mountains west of Kanchanaburi.

Before returning to Bangkok on the 10th, we flew another BPP mission to an almost inaccessible mountain border outpost, the Ban Suan Phung area southwest of Kanchanaburi. In our discussions over the two-day period, I discovered that the tall, wiry, and obviously intelligent Cox was going to depart Air America with the intention to study law. Unlike Wright, he

⁴ Howard Estes Phone conversation, 07/16/92.
Joe Leeker, The Aircraft of Air America, Sikorsky UH-34D (second series).
Wayne Knight Emails, 06/11/00, 06/12//00, 01/25/01, 01/29/01, 05/08/02.
Jim Coble Email, 04/14/02.

wisely planned to attend college in the northeast section of America in pursuit of a full law program.

With PICs generally continuing to rotate every other day, I next flew to Kanchanaburi with Guy Destefano and Rick Decosta. Guy, another class clown, frequently cracked jokes in his broad Massachusetts accent. He also participated in the early high stakes poker games. More than a few players (some reputed to be cheaters themselves) and observers indicated that he cheated. Guy remained with Air America long enough to endure a painful circumcision performed at the Bangkok Christian Hospital. We laughed at him as he walked bow-legged like a crab around the compound to ease his discomfort.

HILL TRIBES

We carried joint army medical personnel to the western mountainous Karen villages of KH Lap and Ban Na Si Long, sandwiching in another trip north to Si Sawat.

The 160,000 Karen people comprised the most numerous and fierce warriors of all Thailand's hill tribes. They lived partially in Burma and partly in Thailand. Emigrating eastward from Burma over the years since World War Two, the Christian tribes had fought with the British against Japanese invaders. Recently, Bangkok newspapers tended to print articles about purported Karen raids on western Thai villages in which the attackers supposedly annihilated everyone using blowguns, bows, spears, and modern rifles. However, similar exaggerated and grossly distorted accounts sprang from Lao-based reporters who, preferring the relative comfort of Vientiane hotels and watering holes, rarely actually journeyed to the scene.

Most Karen tribes lived in highland regions extending from the northwest portion of the country southward along the Burma border. Villages generally occupied sites on sloping foothills

below 2,000 feet, but some settlements were located in valleys. Like other Southeast Asian hill tribes, they migrated within a twenty-to-thirty-mile range in search of fresh agricultural land.

Before these first visits, highland Karen had only limited contact with officials from the Thai government, and often distrusted visitors. They distrusted the Thai because of preconceived notions concerning how Karen people should conform to Thai customs, and made little attempt to understand or appreciate their tribal culture. In the more civilized and acclimated regions of the lowlands, the Karen population appeared satisfied with the existing government. Indeed, enjoying the skydiving, they appeared friendly and courteous.

Even though the people were located a great distance from the communist support bases in Laos, reasons given for the visits to the mountains centered on the fact that subversion of the people would provide the communists blanket control of the western border area and would allow insurgents the opportunity to introduce flanking attacks from the highlands. ⁵

With a little knowledge about the hill people, we landed at one elevated site half expecting a confrontation. However, when eight scruffy unarmed males stumbled out of a tree line, I relaxed. After a minor dialogue, medics went to work examining the natives for various ailments. I observed many injections given to the dark-skinned men. I inquired later as to their symptoms and treatments given, and learned that every man the medics checked revealed an advanced stage of tuberculosis. With little medicine to distribute, the sick men were provided vitamin C to build strength and to help ward off further ills.

⁵ *Highland Peoples of Southeast Asia* Apr. 1970, 18, (foia.ucia.gov/scripts/cgise).

The efforts did not seem like much help for those with such a devastating illness, but perhaps there was future follow up.

BURKE DEPARTS

My former housemate, Jim Spillis, left Bangkok on Lufthansa for Munich, Germany. Accompanying him was Nick Burke and his growing family. Nick had been terminated by the Company after a rather bizarre incident while assigned to Bangkok during late March.

Not scheduled to fly the following day, Nick had returned to the Plaza late after a night of carousing. At 0430 hours, someone roused him from bed, indicating that the pilot originally scheduled for a flight had become ill and was unable to fly. Despite a substantial hangover and exhaling beer fumes, Nick accepted the mission east toward Cambodia. He explained the situation and last-minute crew switch to the JUSMAG major accompanying the mission. However, despite his explanation, MAAG reported Burke's sodden condition to Air America management. He went to Taipei with his family and, because the Company sought to let even good pilots go if there was just cause, he was terminated. As a friendly parting gesture, Rousselot indicated that Nick could return to Air America later if he wished. The family stopped in Hong Kong for a final buying spree, then returned to Bangkok for the flight home. ⁶

SAM

Sam Jordon replaced Destefano as my PIC. Sam's demeanor was very proper and quite surprising for a bush pilot. He was well-spoken, quiet, displaying many attributes of the Southern

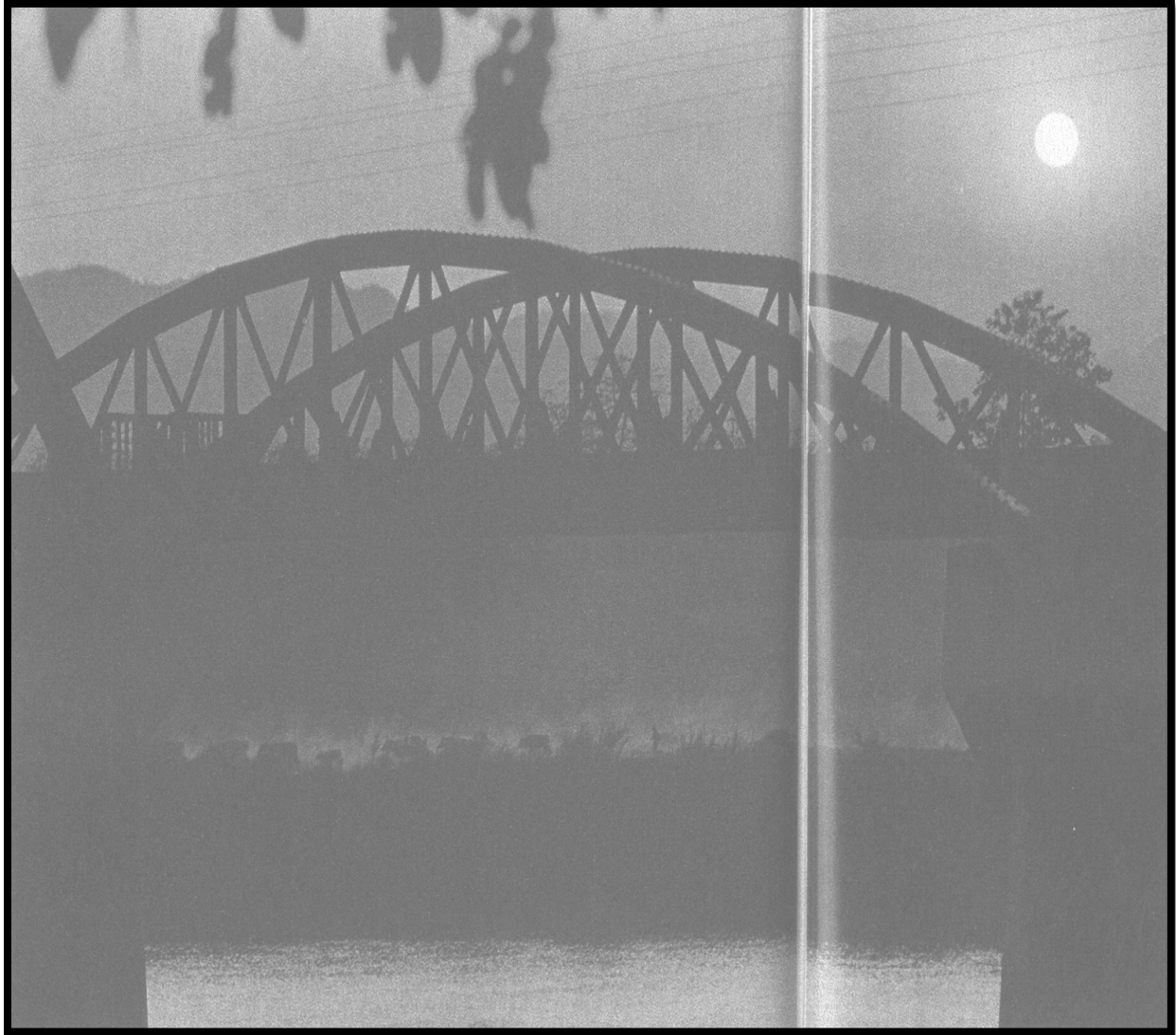
⁶ Nick Burke returned to the USMC. Downed and injured during a cross border SOG mission, he never took advantage of Bob Rousselot's option. However, he did occasionally visit us in Udorn. Nick Burke Interview at his Pensacola, Florida residence, 09/15/97.

gentleman. One could easily deduce that he sprang from an old mainline Virginia family. Before joining Air America, he had worked for International Business Machines, the same company I had interviewed and briefly considered working for after graduating from Duke. After a time, Sam found the massive company's rules and regulations too restrictive and left.

Early in his Air America career, Sam contracted a serious case of hepatitis. During enforced bed rest and a long recovery, he learned to speak fluent Thai. Following Abadie's example, he was one of the first Americans to marry a Thai woman. Sam had one unusual habit. He would sometimes stop talking, shuffle his feet, screw up his face, and sniff as if detecting a noxious odor. I never did figure this out, but considered that he might have an internal nostril or sinus problem

Consistent with the week's missions, we returned to Kanchanaburi. Between three local flights, I had a chance to visit two major landmarks, the first made famous in the movie. The bridge, originally portrayed as a wood suspension type soaring high above a rushing river, actually was of a steel Bailey construction that was low and spanned a slow-moving river. Surprised, and more than a little disappointed, I walked along the rails to say that I had, while thinking that life's impressions are not always as conceived, or as others would have one believe.

Next, I visited a well-tended war cemetery where hundreds of British, Australian, Dutch and Indian POWs were eventually interred while working on what became known as the "death railway". After allied submarines and planes successfully interdicted the sea route to Rangoon via Singapore and the Malacca Strait, Japanese leaders considered an alternate logistical artery to Burma an immediate and necessary goal. Therefore, the Japanese introduced western prisoners by the



Steel Bailey Bridge at sunset spanning the Mae Nam Klong a few miles above the point where the Mae Nam Khwai Noi joined at Kanchanaburi, Thailand, (portrayed in the movie as the Kwai River Bridge).

National Geographic, Volume 132, #1, July 1967.

southern route to build the railroad. Folklore indicated that one man died for each of the 24,000 wooden ties in the line. However, housed at a small tree-shaded kiosk, a shopworn British manual containing names and nationalities estimated that 100,000 people had died in the region. This figure included, in addition to the western slave labor, Japanese, Thai, and other nationalities who feverishly toiled to accomplish the work. Abuse, disease, bad food, tainted water, and the harsh climate all combined to exact a high toll in human lives. I learned that seven Americans originally interred there were exhumed and returned to the U.S. for reburial. As I walked along the hot paths among the gravestones, I pondered the hell those unfortunates must have endured. *How could anyone understand what occurred there unless he actually experienced the situation?* At one point, my wanderings took me past a monument erected in recognition of the Japanese war dead. I was surprised by this memorial of compassion, for many Thai people still harbored ill will against the Japanese.

BRIDGE HISTORY

A Veterans of Foreign Wars article written later described a portion of this infamous World War Two chapter. It stated that survivors of the USS *Houston*, sunk in the Sunder Strait 1 March 1942, and soldiers from the Dutch East Indies, were sent to build the railroad. Over a Forty-two-month period, construction on part of the line involved 668 Americans, allies, and Asians building a 260-mile Japanese railway connecting Ban Pong, Thailand, to Thanbyuzayat, Burma. More than a hundred Americans died in less than a year on the sixty-five-mile section between Thanbyuzayat and the 105-kilometer marker.

In early April 1944, during an eight-day period, B-24s from the 36th Squadron, 7th Bomber Group, and 10th Air Force

destroyed two bridges between Moulmein, Burma, and Kanchanaburi, Thailand.

Following hostilities, 127 American POWs and ninety-four additional men were evacuated from Bangkok and Phet Buri, and flown to the U.S.

Years later, survivors erected a plaque in memory of the dead at Konyu Cutting, or "Hell Fire Pass," north of Kanchanaburi. As an aside, toward the end of the war, an Aussie recalled the guards forcing men to dig a ditch around the camp perimeter. Machine gun emplacements were established in every corner of the earthworks. Then, in event of an external attack, and pending orders from the Japanese Emperor, they would be summarily executed.⁷

Just as I was beginning to accumulate some decent flight time, a cold virus invaded my throat and proceeded rapidly to my chest, probably gleaned from germs lodged in the Plaza Annex's dirty air conditioner. It seemed hardly like a month passed without contracting something: a cold, diarrhea, or the catch-all phrase, general malaise. The problem passed quickly and in two days Sam and I ferried Hotel Bravo to Udorn.

⁷ Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) article, *Railroad of Death*, Aug 1995.

Before departing Bangkok, on Easter Sunday I sent a letter home detailing what little I understood about current events in my area gleaned from scuttlebutt and *Bangkok Post* newspaper articles. Although always suspect as to the validity and reliability of Southeast Asian newspaper reporting, it appeared that fighting in Laos was re-erupting. Without any means to verify details, I speculated that a full-scale war would soon occur, and, as usual, the U.S. would wait too long before taking action.

Despite this recent development, that might usher our reentry into the fray, the news did not appear favorable from Company sources regarding aircraft retention. Namely, the Marine Corps was reputed to soon be reclaiming thirteen of their bailed helicopters for re-issuance to the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF). This would leave us only seven H-34s to perform a non-job. On the surface, the total number appeared sufficient to cover present requirements for our contracted operation. However, on any given day, we could only muster a few airworthy helicopters for missions. Using the stated number as a base, if the other thirteen ships left immediately, only five of the projected seven H-34s would have been available for our operation. Probably not factored into the equation by military planners, one of our H-34s was in Saigon undergoing IRAN (heavy maintenance inspection and repair as necessary), one sat in the Udorn hangar undergoing major maintenance, and there were no allowances made for ships undergoing required maintenance inspections. With lead time normally required for any movement, perhaps under pressure to deliver the H34s to the Vietnamese Air Force ASAP, planners seemed utterly blind to the military situation developing in Laos.

Another theory presupposed the aircraft phase-down was yet another part of a larger plan at higher levels to diminish Air America's theater presence. The military situation in Vietnam continued to deteriorate, and our sizeable operation was considered in some political quarters as a CIA-administered war effort. Deemed too large to maintain as an originally conceived clandestine mission, political types feared adverse publicity and they desired change. ¹

On our level, seven or more pilots had already been fired or chosen to depart on their own volition. With thirty men remaining on the pilot roster, and only a few helicopters projected in our inventory, everyone expected further personnel cutbacks. ²

Naturally, because of my embarrassing Moore inquisition the preceding month, I harbored little confidence in surviving any purge.

Late the same day, Vientiane Ambassador Leonard Unger forwarded a Twix to the State Department indicating that it was difficult to assess exactly what the communists planned. Recapitulating the situation, he reported that since fall, the communist objective had attempted to weaken, divide, and eventually fragment Kong Le's forces, and strengthen the progressive (defecting) Neutralists. Communist efforts during February and March further attempted to weaken the Neutralists and foster a superior military posture for the PL faction. The enemy goals were enhanced by terror tactics, bribery, and psychological threats fostered by Viet Minh presence. They also took advantage of Souvanna Phouma's extended absence and

¹ CJ Abadie Email, 02/18/99.

² In order to satisfy all contingencies, normal manning levels dictated two and a half pilots per ship. This number would facilitate normal scheduling and allow for sickness, and leave.

unwillingness to take a firm stand on pressing matters when in Vientiane.

Quinim's April assassination certainly disrupted the communist timetable, placing conservative Neutralists on the defense and causing the leftists to accelerate action. Specifically, during the previous ten days, renewed military activity had occurred in north Laos. During that time, the Pathet Lao moved forces from other areas to foster the impression that the FAN were threatened or surrounded at Vang Vieng (Lima-16), Moung Kassy (VS-153), Ban Ban, Tha Thom VS-11), the Plain of Jars, and vicinity. Viet Minh were believed present with Pathet Lao troops in some forward areas. ³

On the 12th, a detachment of Kong Le's forces reported capturing eighteen Vietminh soldiers during fighting along the road to Xieng Khouang. Two days later, after attack by enemy units, the prisoners mysteriously escaped. ⁴

There was little actual fighting or many casualties during a ten-day period. At Khang Khay, it appeared that dissident Neutralists with little hostile action and supported by Pathet Lao elements, created a threat sufficient to cause Kong Le's units to withdraw into the surrounding hills. In the Ban Ban Valley, FAN forces felt threatened and surrounded, but no fighting resulted. At Xieng Khouang, a FAN leader defected and joined the enemy. After shooting and skirmishes in Xieng Khouang Ville cut off supplies, FAN units pulled out, leaving the leftists in full control of the provincial capital.

³ Although considered a defunct organization following the end of the First Indochina War and the communist takeover of North Vietnam, State Department officials still liberally used the term Viet Minh in communications to American bureaucrats.

⁴ Arthur Dommen, *Conflict in Laos*, 254.

The communists hoped that threats, isolation of some units, and severing of supply lines would lower morale and encourage total dissidence. This in turn would cause Kong Le's troops to desert, defect, and sufficiently disintegrate as a viable army. Accomplishing this would allow Colonel Deuane to assume the title of the true Neutralist leader and take over the entire Plain of Jars.

Ambassador Unger was confident that with plans already underway to assure Kong Le adequate supplies, funds, ICC assistance, assurance that his rear and flanks were secured by Meo ADCs, and firmer conviction of the Prime Minister, that a free Laos could survive. ⁵

A later National Security Council memorandum, in an understatement, indicated that the current Plain of Jars situation was highly confused. It stated that two major towns previously occupied by both factions at Xieng Khouang Ville and Khang Khay were believed to have fallen to Pathet Lao and dissident units. However, Kong Le still apparently held Plain of Jars airfields. Control of these sites was paramount to continued supply and his ability to resist total enemy ejection from the areas.

The memorandum concluded that current action provided a firm test of the Geneva Agreements, and stressed greater diplomatic efforts to solve the problem, particularly since the communists thwarted ICC efforts to journey to the Plain of Jars, establish a presence there, or to restore the ceasefire. During this same period, PL-NVA soldiers detained ICC members at the important Tchepone Military Region Three resupply location, and

⁵ Lao Crisis 453 Department of State Central Files, POL 27 Laos, Telegram from the Embassy in Laos to the Department of State, 14 April 1963.

they were not allowed to investigate visible AAA gun installations.

As a hedge against diplomatic efforts failing to restore and stabilize the situation, additional clandestine efforts to assist the Neutralists and enable them to hold the Xieng Khouang airfield (Lima-22) were already underway. ⁶

⁶ NSC Memorandum circa 16 April 1963.

Because of Air America's willingness to respond to emergencies, and a unique ability to immediately position equipment to specific sites, helicopter crews performed early U.S. military rescue missions that portended future expanded SAR involvement. While I was still in Bangkok, a USAF C-123 crashed at Nakhon Phanom. Working late in his office, Jim Coble received a call after dark from an Air Force source requesting an emergency evacuation of a surviving crewmember. He went to the Club to solicit a pilot, but all available men were drinking and disinterested, so he elected to fly the mission by himself. He departed for Nakhon Phanom with one sober and willing senior flight mechanic to keep him company in the left seat. The trip proved very difficult, for it was the height of the smoky season, and no visible cues were available in the form of lights or a horizon. Therefore, he elected to use dead reckoning. Arriving at the uncompleted strip, he found the landing zone in an area defined by three Jeeps and a truck. Formed in a circle, their headlights pointed toward and illuminated the center, which caused the pilot some uncomfortable moments during landing.

The survivor and two medics were quickly loaded for the return trip to Udorn. On the way, Jim learned the reason for the crash. Apparently, crewmembers in the aircraft were engaged in an incredulous game whereby the loadmaster attempted to snag a pair of female panties from a flagpole. This necessitated radio coordination between the loadmaster and pilots, and more than a little hairy control manipulation. During the maneuvering process, the plane crashed, killing three men. The loadmaster jumped from the plane just before impact and survived.

Three minutes after Coble landed at Udorn, the injured man was transferred to a waiting C-130 with engines running on the taxiway to depart for the Clark Air Force hospital on Luzon, Philippine Islands.

A day or two later, Jim learned that the man had died just before reaching Clark. He assumed that all colorful aspects pertaining to the crash were not included in the official crash investigation report. ¹

The rites-of-spring water festival celebrating the ancient Thai New Year was in its final stages when we returned to Udorn. Sometimes the supposedly innocuous water throwing aspect of the holiday blossomed out of hand when Thai boys, probably off-duty soldiers, rode through town in the rear portion of open trucks spraying all they encountered with liquid from fifty-five-gallon drums. I thought I had avoided the "fun" until, weaving my way through traffic downtown on my sick Honda, a gal stepped from the curb and doused me with a bucket of water. The careless act seemed to lack all semblance of common sense, but I was traveling slowly, and fortunately maintained control of the bike.

CLUB

The Club had been open on a limited basis since March, and had already achieved notoriety from the rumor-a-day crowd. At first, believing decent female waitresses unsuitable for exposure to pilot animal advances, Moore had hired only male waiters. (He had formed this opinion after the experiment at the Marine snack bar.) Hired from middle class families, with some knowledge of English, the boys did their best to learn common dining terms from the Chinese headwaiter, "Y.S." Most foodstuffs

¹ Jim Coble Emails, 03/08/02, 08/20/03.
Thai Air Accidents.

for the dining room were purchased and trucked north from Bangkok. Other times they were sent by train. A circular water fountain graced the tennis-volleyball court between the club and administration building, where a concrete walk joined the two structures. As Ben planned, the area increasingly appeared more like the western concept of civilization and definitely improved our morale.

While I serviced the JUSMAG requirements in Bangkok, the yet unnamed Recreation Club officially opened. High level guests, some still in the area from the previous week, included: President Hugh Grundy, VPFO Bob Rousselot, Vice President of Technical Services Al Weste, Southeast Asia Regional Director Jack McMahon, the Taipei Director of Personnel, the Director of Public Relations, the Director of Maintenance, temporary Vientiane Station Manager Dave Hickler, and a host of others. Jim Coble, resplendent in his orange Thai silk dinner jacket, attended from local management.

Hickler was an excellent addition to the Vientiane management team. Assigned to Vientiane from Taipei, he temporarily replaced the greatly unpopular Roy Stitt who had departed on home leave for several months. Because of generational gaps and completely different aircraft flown, there was always some animosity between base managements. This was always a dominant factor when Stitt was present. He considered himself responsible for all Lao facilities, regardless of which resources he was supposed to support, and considered any Udorn input as meddling in his sandbox. In contrast to Stitt's style, the more affable Hickler did much to reestablish rapport with the Udorn division. Hickler found the job exciting, demanding, and different from the tasks that he had performed in his many years in Japan. It consisted of a front-line job with high level



Air America Club displaying the completed fountain, landscaping, and concrete walk between the new Club and the Administration-Operations building.

Nick Burke Collection March-April 1963.

operational responsibilities requiring daily attention to the many facets of the large operation. ²

Precipitated by increased action on the plain of Jars, and lifting our spirits in regard to return to the field, a few senior helicopter pilots began filtering back into Laos on a limited basis. Actually, this had been quietly occurring since late March, with crews clandestinely loading supplies at the Nong Khai airstrip and bypassing the ICC watchdog system at Vientiane. ³ Moreover, one or two crews continued to RON at the Sam Tong warehouse.

Despite the helicopter reentry into Laos, Howard and I were still First Officers with no inkling of upgrading to Captain. (Dick Chambers, Jim Spillis, and now Dick Todd had departed the Company.)

My next to last flight in April occurred on the 18th. Old W.C. Russell and I delivered Gordon Murchie and a camera team to a model village at Don Ya Nong and other villages in the Thai countryside. The mission was to create a training film for selected organizations and individuals, then eventually a program for television audiences as *The Big Picture*. I was filmed wearing my gross-looking uniform. Perhaps conceived as a future market town, the clean swept village exhibited wide laterite streets and neat rows of fenced stilt houses. In an attempt to disseminate health information to the largely illiterate and ignorant populace, large poster boards pictorially and graphically displayed the life cycle of various parasites and their hosts (like the common housefly) and

² Dave Hickler Paper. *Air America Archives*, University of Texas at Richardson, Texas.

EW Knight Email, 02/24/01.

³ Actually, we had been clandestinely performing this function since the fall of the previous year.

measures to take in preventing infestation. I laughed at these, for I knew that old Thai habits were difficult, if not impossible, to change. For example, through scuttlebutt or rare health lectures, we were cautioned to only consume dark fish sauce in our rice or soup, never the brown type marketed in Udorn. In the latter's case, the tiny silver fish, seined from dirty klongs, were merely ground up and bottled uncooked, hence unfit for human consumption. At first glance, this might appear an acceptable processing method. However, unseen by the naked eye, with snails as the intermediate host, the fish harbored microscopic liver flukes. Naturally, the uncooked sauce still contained flukes. Although informed of the danger, few people heeded the warning, for the brown mixture possessed a superior taste that their ancestors had enjoyed eating for centuries. Consequently, as witnessed in specimen jars containing cadaver parts at the Udorn hospital, the lack of knowledge and abstinence led to perforated livers, decreased bodily function, and eventual demise.

Daytime heat and humidity in Southeast Asia always attained crescendo proportions in April. Such conditions tended to sap human vitality and discourage unnecessary movement. Without rainstorms, sleep was difficult to achieve at night because of the residual heat radiating into the atmosphere, the restrictive mosquito net, and lack of any airflow in my bedroom.

On one of my visits to Asian Acres, an eight-bungalow compound off Markkeng Road, to use Joe Marlin's tape recorder, I discovered that Louie Jones was terminating his Air America employment. (Joe Marlin, John Timmons, Bill Palmer, Dick Crafts, Stan Wilson, Carl Gable, along with their girlfriends were a few

men that lived there.) Lou had recently shot a wandering dog and an irate neighbor had reported the incident. ⁴

Of course, Ben Moore eventually heard about the Company gun policy violation and had no other recourse than to ask for Lou's resignation. Liquidating his possessions, Lou had a small green fan for sale. I bought the device and used the addition to good advantage both day and night.

BANNY

About this time, another incident occurred that nearly prompted my early departure from Air America. As was customary when not working, I went to the compound daily to check and retrieve any mail from home. As our only link to the outside world, mail or a tape sent through the Army post office system constituted the highlight of a day. Sporadic at best, the letters arrived from Bangkok on the New Zealand Bristol plane. Correspondence was handled first by STARCOM personnel and then picked up by an Air America representative for distribution to employees.

There were no employee mailboxes, so an individual had to request a Thai clerk in the operations area to check for you.

When moving Administration and Operation Departments to the second barracks-like building to allow Club construction, attempts were initiated to duplicate the identical configuration as in the original structure. As one climbed the steps and entered the screened porch, the large Operations Department was located to the left at the building's east end. A plate glass window with a centered hole for transactions separated the large section from the porch. Chinese radio operators performed their

⁴ Believers in reincarnation, many Thai people presupposed dogs might be ancestors.



New Zealand Bristol aircraft which flew the circuits delivering Army post office (APO) mail, movies, and supplies to the U.S. Army Signal Corps at Udorn and other bases throughout Thailand.

MacAlan Thompson Collection.

magic to the rear. Abadie and Coble's small Chief Pilot office adjoined operations.

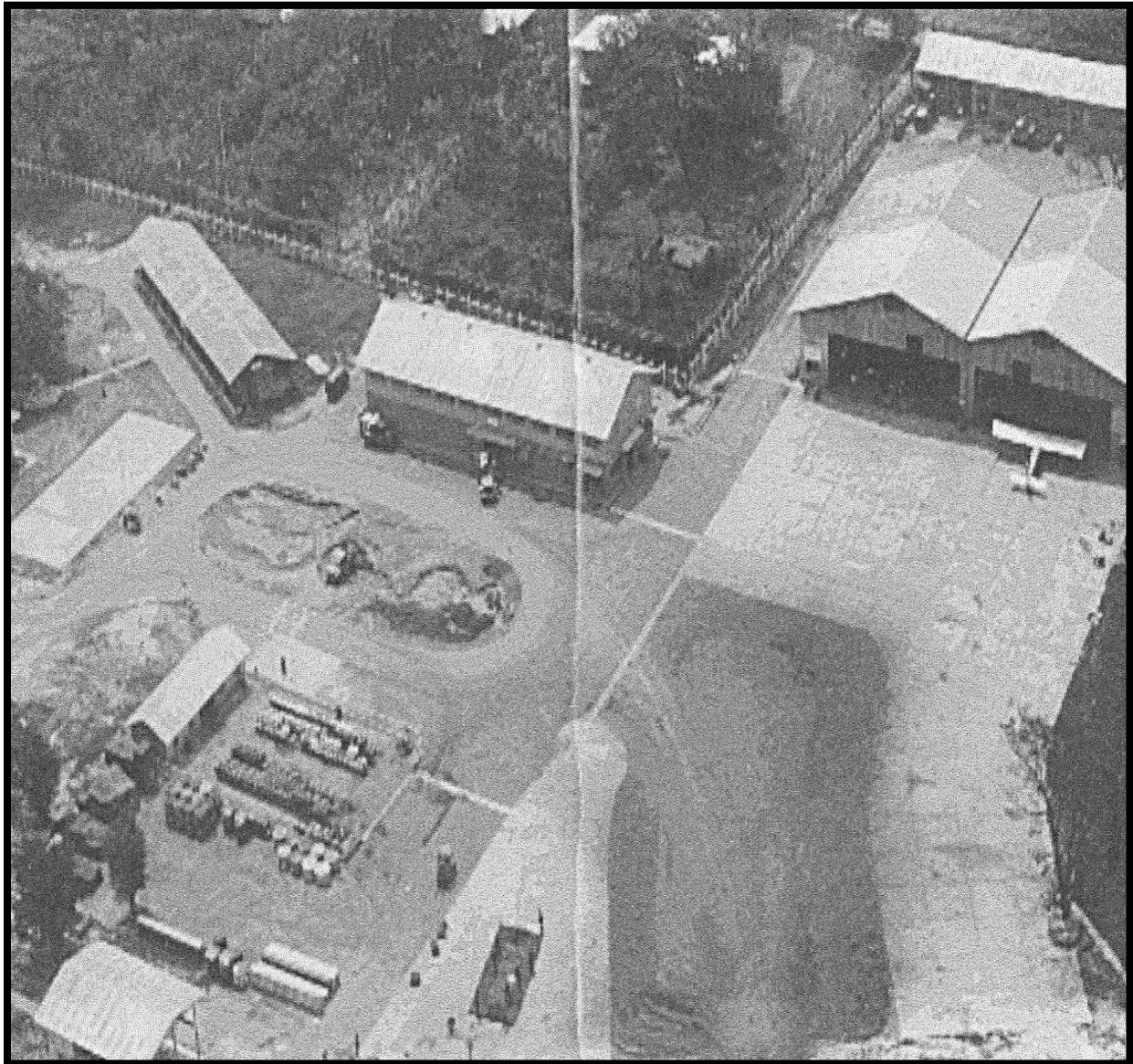
Thai clerks Supone and Banny Eckapol had worked in operations since 1961, lifting some of the early crushing workload from Abadie's shoulders. The tall and effeminate-looking Supone was by far the more personable of the two, and always performed his work with a smile. However, athletic looking Banny was more taciturn and not always an easy man to deal with. Both clerks spoke English well and, as with all his aviators, Abadie insisted that out of courtesy and respect they address pilots with the Captain title. As many times before, I requested Banny, a snotty person even on a good day, to check my mail. Surprisingly, he refused. I thought that was curious for he had just handed another pilot his mail. Whether because of a perceived slight to my perceived lowly First Officer status, something that had been grating on me for months, constant worry over retaining my employment, relative flying inactivity, or the extreme heat, I took the affront personally and lost control. Normally a fairly considerate and peaceful person, before thinking rationally, I shouted loudly at the surly clerk that if he did not immediately check my mail, I was going to pull him through the blankety-blank hole in the glass and soundly thrash him.

Anticipating a reaction, an immediate hush fell over the dilapidated porch, as the few remaining pilots waited for the tense scene to unfold. Predictably, after hearing the commotion, Abadie charged out his open door and sternly inquired as to the nature of the outburst. Still hyperactive, but fully believing Ab would support me, I rapidly attempted to explain the situation. I was wrong. Instead of accepting my position, he authoritatively countered in a loud voice, emphasizing that Banny was **his** clerk who worked for **him**.

I partially appreciated the significance of his statement, but still angry, transferred my animosity to the CPH that almost triggered pugilistic action. Although tightly wound like a spring at the moment, I was not totally stupid. Abadie was a muscular, larger man and at that time seemed to tower over me. Specifically, during any contest of fisticuffs, he likely would have cleaned my clock. Typifying the flight or fight survival instinct programmed into human bodies after millenniums of evolution, with fists balled, I shook a little, and tears began to well up in my eyes. Only an inner restraint and innate sense of survival prevented me from lashing out abruptly at my perceived antagonist.

Sensing, and taking advantage of my discomfort, Abadie calmly but menacingly asked, "*Casterlin, do you want to go home tomorrow?*" Shocking me back to a semblance of reality, his question produced an immediate calming effect to my tortured soul. The implied threat was instantly processed in my brain, and fortunately, I still possessed enough presence of mind to realize that I had not come all the way to Southeast Asia and endured waiting the long months as a First Officer to leave in this fashion. Therefore, I responded with a meek, single word, "No."

With the altercation phase completed, there was no need for further discussion. Therefore, Abadie wheeled and returned to his Spartan office. The hush on the porch was deafening. Still shaking from the after effects of a massive injection of adrenaline, I breathed deeply and took solace in a long, cool drink from the water fountain. The few people witnessing the exchange offered no comfort and remained silent, as I left the facility for home without my mail. I was embarrassed. I had not won the argument, and quite possibly was going home. *Could a day be any worse?*



Air America compound located on the south side of the RTAFB Udorn, Thailand circa July 1963. Tin roofed Administration-Operations building (AB-2) at upper left adjacent to the security fence separating the Air America facility from the Royal Thai Army base. Clockwise from AB-2: supply building (completed August 1962), double hangars (extension August 1962) and ramp leading to the helicopter parking area, fire truck shed, POL (hard topped December 1962), and the volleyball court (August 1962). Not visible in this photo, the Club was situated to the left of the tennis-volleyball court. Construction in the oval below supply is the beginning of a gazebo style supermarket building not fully completed until October.

C.J. Abadie Collection.

When I returned to an empty Sopa Villa, I recapitulated the incident in my mind and considered it one of the stupidest in which I had ever participated. It certainly was not consistent with how I normally acted, and, in retrospect, the entire situation was ludicrous. I had definitely been wrong in my actions and should never have lost control. I finally decided that if I desired to remain with Air America, I better attempt to make amends with the boss. With this in mind, I returned to the compound later that afternoon and apologized to Ab for my conduct. He was realistic and seemed to take my act of contrition in stride, but I left his office still believing my days were numbered. However, events unfolding in Laos, and our place in the equation, probably saved my bacon.

Until Abadie later left Udorn to work in Taipei, he remained Banny's champion. The Thai man continued to rub people the wrong way, and some asserted the clerk believed himself more important to the organization than any pilot. Even Jim Coble had conflicts with the contentious person, which at any time could have exploded into a major conflict, but generally ended in only shouting matches. Without Abadie's support, Banny's attitude eventually resulted in his transfer out of Udorn to Vientiane operations, where I was surprised to see him while transiting one day. Coble maintained that he did not engineer the transfer, but did not object to it, as he did not believe Banny contributed a great deal to the organization.

During April, Limaiai Somsakdi graduated from Assumption Commercial College in Bangkok at the age of twenty. Known simply as Somsak by us barbarian foreigners uncomfortable with Thai names, he joined our organization as an Operations Dispatcher Clerk in April. Somsak, a beloved employee, remained with us for the duration of the Maddriver Project. He learned a lot from the

operation, including English, association with people, and management, which later aided him in obtaining jobs.

In 1965, wearing many hats, he was elevated to a clerk/secretary for Chief Pilot Wayne Knight. He also worked for ACPH Marius Burke and Chief Pilot Fixed Wing Jim Rhyne. By 1969 he was the Chief of Crew Scheduling for Thailand and Laos. ⁵

⁵ Jim Coble Emails, 04/13/02, 04/14/02.
Limaiai Somsakdi Emails, 03/02/99, 03/03/99. In 1972, former Air America clerk Somsak married a lady who had also attended Assumption College and knew my future wife well.

While I was stewing over the latest blunder with Chief Pilot Abadie, and my questionable immediate future, White House meetings regarding the Lao situation continued daily in Washington. Any definitive solution was an enigma, for compared to South Vietnam's generally flat terrain, accessible ports and airfields, landlocked Laos presented an adverse location for realistic U.S. military action. Department of Defense (DOD) leaders' recommendations not to position large numbers of troops there weighed heavily on conference attendees. However, the President indicated that the U.S. could initiate more aggressive action.

Latest intelligence reports revealed that Kong Le's forces had relocated to the Moung Phanh grass-dirt airport (Lima-106) and re-grouped in the surrounding hills. It further stated that Meo forces might help alleviate the Neutralist quandary by harassing Pathet Lao supply lines. ¹

A telegram forwarded to the Joint Chief of Staff, White House, State, and other agencies from Vientiane Agency personnel provided a more concise assessment of Plain of Jars developments and Kong Le's deteriorating situation. Led by Ambassador Unger, his Country Team worked together and agreed on the issues. This helped to facilitate a timely response to the situation.

The Twix opened by comparing Neutralist troops' fighting performance with RLA forces, and concluded there was little difference in the two groups when confronting Viet Minh forces. They both retreated or abandoned positions equally under light opposition, particularly if attacks were accompanied by

¹ *Vietnam War: The Documents*, 4&5, 19 April 1963; (mcadams.posc.mu.edu/viet).

artillery fire. In addition, witnesses indicated that General Kong Le demonstrated weakness as a military tactician, and his vacillating attitude changed from day to day.

Vientiane's Chief of Station believed that the next strong enemy attack would eject Kong Le from the Plain of Jars if Vang Pao's troops were not authorized to aggressively assist him and exert pressure where necessary. Therefore, to intimidate and thwart enemy advances, the ambassador authorized several measures. The first was installation of 75mm and 57mm Meo crew-served guns in range of Khang Khay and Singkapo's headquarters at Ban Liang.

Implementing this tactic, two Air America-crewed H-34s covertly slipped into Laos to deliver guns and ammunition to Meo hill positions. During the process, an enemy observer on the valley floor reported the helicopter shuttles to his superiors. That same night, a Meo soldier monitoring the radio at Sam Tong informed H-34 crews that Radio Hanoi had just broadcast that hundreds of American helicopters were observed flying around the Plain of Jars slinging artillery guns.²

Also approved were C-46 cargo airdrops of ammunition north and south of Xieng Khouang Ville to support Meo conducting harassing and maneuvering tactics against Pathet Lao units. Additional airdrops were delivered to Vang Pao's headquarters at Site-98 (Long Tieng) by a Caribou assigned to distribute ammunition to outlying sites. Although this was allowed by a provision in the 1962 Geneva Accords, at RLG request, many supplies allocated for the FAN and Meo quietly flowed to

² Dan Alston Interview, 09/22/99.
The Author has no doubt that Royal Thai Army artillery personnel accompanied these guns.



Fixed wing parking ramp at Wattay Airport, Vientiane Laos. Embassy Attaché (AIRA) C-47 to right. C-46s and a C-130 left side. Two wheeled transportation vehicles also parked on the ramp.

Mike Marshall Collection.

Souvanna from Thailand, as his Lao cabinet had not yet sanctioned the movement. Bypassing them, he directed Soviet and American aircraft to deliver supplies to his supporters on the PDJ. In a separate move, Phoumi also used his handful of leased cargo planes to deliver FAR supplies to the FAN.

Collective opinion assumed that Meo support would provide Kong Le the opportunity to hold his Plain of Jars airfield position, and in conjunction with Meo efforts, Lat Houang (LS-9) on the eastern Plain. Although constrained as to greater aggressive movements out of concern for increased North Vietnamese participation, Meo pressure around Khang Khay, Xieng Khouang, and Ban Liang appeared to be effective. Vang Pao's agents indicated that Pathet Lao soldiers were short of rice, causing them to forage through local villages and search for possible lines of retreat. Pending rejection of the Prime Minister's plea for a tangible cease-fire, the enemy might attempt to eject Kong Le from the Plain of Jars. However, deterrence would be the Meo forces' capability to commence artillery fire on their strongholds. ³

U.S. military "flapping" continued. With Laos teetering on the brink of civil war, President Kennedy, concluding that a failure to respond to events on the Plain of Jars would be interpreted as a failure to stabilize Laos and a decision to abandon the country, sanctioned a U.S. Naval carrier task force's entry into the South China Sea. (This was a segment of Joint Task Force 116.) Implementing this, the Joint Chiefs of Staff ordered CINCPAC's Admiral Felt to shift a carrier task group containing a Marine Battalion Landing Team (BLT) to sea

³ Lao Crisis, Telegram sent to the Joint Chiefs of Staff 04/20/63, 468.

Memorandum from Michael V. Forrestal of the National Security Council Staff to President Kennedy, 05/01/63.

off South Vietnam. By 24 April, the USS *Ticonderoga* and LPH USS *Princeton* sailed to pre-determined positions and were joined by other warships, including the USS *Yorktown*. By 3 May, the show of force, after achieving its purpose, returned to normal operations. ⁴

The Pathet Lao, left to their own designs, would never have been overly aggressive, effective, or caused a serious problem if not for the addition of Viet Minh soldiers. Never acknowledged to the world by North Vietnamese leaders, the outsiders' presence was verified by members of the French Military Mission who observed truckloads of Vietnamese troops wearing Pathet Lao uniforms and caps on the road from Khang Khay to Xieng Khouang. Experienced French personnel easily distinguished the difference between a Lao and Vietnamese, especially when addressing the soldiers in Lao and they were unable to answer.

On the 21st, documents retrieved from three enemy soldiers killed on the Khang Khay-Xieng Khouang airport road indicated that the men were Vietnamese. This intelligence was forwarded to Vientiane for analysis and political gain.

When confronted with this information, the North Vietnamese Embassy admitted that a few hundred Vietnamese "construction workers" were in Laos to improve Khang Khay under an aid program to the country. After the Pathet Lao forced Kong Le's men to evacuate Khang Khay, Souvanna Phouma attempted to effect removal of the "workers," indicating that the work specified in the aid program had long since been completed. The North Vietnamese

⁴ Ken Conboy,, 99.
Victor Anthony, 82.

Ambassador countered by replying that arrangements for rotating the workers from the country were proceeding as scheduled.⁵

⁵ Arthur Dommen, *Conflict in Laos*, 254.

Despairing of longevity with Air America, I finally terminated my already waning relationship with Fairy. I had been doing a lot of thinking about my uncertain future with Air America, her aggressive and obvious desire to permanently cement our relationship, and the dissenting pressure from my Father, when Jack Connor confronted me with a gigantic bombshell.

One afternoon at the intersection of Wat Po Road and Tahan Tanon Road, Jack scornfully informed me that Hussein, the Indian jewelry shop owner in town, had just informed him that Fairy was nothing more than a "whore of the streets." Although merely passing along hearsay, Jack, always a brutally frank individual, rarely minced words. You can imagine my reaction. Other than to protect me from a horrible mistake, I never discovered Jack's true motive for sharing this piece of distasteful information to me. Naturally, I was shocked, quite upset and, in denial, a little angry with Jack. In fact, I was briefly reminded of ancient recipients of bad news often killing the messenger. What puzzled me, however, was the fact that in our encounters together, Hussein and Fairy appeared to be such good friends. During our several early trips to his popular shop, the two seemed to interface very well. *Still, why would the shop owner divulge such scathing and scurrilous information like this to anyone if not true?* Too embarrassed, I never confronted Hussein over the issue.

Whatever my conflicts and feelings, the revelation gave me pause to reconsider our relationship. True or not, I wondered about all Fairy's trips to Bangkok, and conceded that what Jack said could in fact have validity. In addition, not prepared or ready for marriage, I could ill afford to become tied down at

this unstable juncture of my life, particularly with someone I did not fully trust. Therefore, after due diligence, I rationalized that this information provided a catalyst and justifiable means to exit a potentially bad situation.

During Fairy's next visit to Sopa Villa, just after she exited a samlor, but before reaching the steps, I informed her of my decision to terminate our relationship. She accepted my proclamation calmly, but then demanded to know the reason. She was entitled to that, but of course, I spared her my recent knowledge of the Hussein slander. The rest was difficult to explain, for we (at least I) had enjoyed companionship and our numerous good times together. During our relationship, she had expertly smoothed my transition into the Thai society and cultural niceties. I really owed her a lot for that, and certainly did not want to hurt her. Therefore, I ineffectually attempted to explain that I was not ready for marriage at such an unstable time. She seemed to accept my explanation, and left seemingly still a friend. I felt relieved, but sullied in the fact that in winning I had ultimately lost. For instance, I forgot what she had taught me concerning face. *How many people had she informed that we would marry?* I knew at least a couple. In time I would realize that the episode was not over and, as the proverb states, "hell hath no fury equal to a woman scorned." Little did I know what trouble she would generate for me in the near future.

TAPE

Directly after this unpleasant encounter, I recorded another tape for the hometown folks. Again, I used Joe Marlin's machine at his Asian Acres bungalow. I began by reading a *Bangkok Post* article entitled *Gun Pointed at SEA*, which

pessimistically described Kong Le's problems on the Plain of Jars.

Located in his headquarters twenty-eight miles from Xieng Khouang Ville, his forces were bottled up with only three days' supply of ammunition. Ever the consummate politician, Souvanna Phouma insisted that there was a way out of the situation, but to all other spectators Kong Le definitely was in trouble.

After transcribing the informative article, I speculated over what would happen to Vientiane if Pathet Lao troops captured the city. Certainly, the C-46s, C-47s, C-45, C-123s, C-7 Caribous, Helio Couriers and crews would transfer to Udorn. After such relocation, the town would become a madhouse of chaos with housing rents once again soaring.

STRIPPED TO THE BONE

The Marine Corps retrieved thirteen of our previously bailed H-34 helicopters. I was not present to witness the sad movement, but believe that they were delivered to South Vietnamese forces. Out of seven remaining machines, my original estimate of five available ships for daily operations proved optimistic, especially after Bill Cook's caper leading to the loss of Hotel Foxtrot in the Sam Tong area. Therefore, at least for the near term, only four H-34s would be operational at any time. Even with a few Captains sick or on leave, the predicted flight time spread among twenty-five Captains would be dismal, and if we lost another ship...?

Estes and I continued to be the only First Officers remaining in the helicopter program. Losing patience waiting to upgrade, Howard wrote to Rousselot inquiring about our future status. Without any immediate positive word, he planned to leave Air America. With nowhere else to go, I remained more optimistic. The Company was still weeding out dead wood, and I

had a gut feeling that I had not been with Air America long enough to cause sufficient problems and qualify for that select category. Furthermore, I sensed that I would be employed with Air America for some time. (This was indeed quite prophetic.) However, I qualified my thoughts by indicating to the folks, "***I may be here for years or home tomorrow.***"

In his quest to improve his lifestyle, Howard reputedly was talking to an unnamed multi-millionaire with a railroad contract near Nong Khai. The entrepreneur had plans to purchase Hughes helicopters and intended to hire three pilots to support the operation. When queried by the contractor, Estes requested 1,250 dollars per month plus living expenses. Citing few details, he asked if I would be interested in the pending deal. The offer was tempting, but I was reluctant to quit Air America when it appeared that Laos was erupting again and we could soon be making big money. No one desired a large war that necessitated entry of the U.S. military and the loss of our jobs. Nevertheless, looking at this scenario in a more positive light, should our military invade Laos, we could work behind enemy lines clandestinely supplying friendly forces as Civil Air Transport planes had been tapped to do in Korea. ¹

In regard to Thai politics, I informed the parents that pro-western Prime Minister Sarit suffered from a serious liver ailment that required treatment abroad several times. ²

Concerned, we pilots speculated about who could possibly replace the staunch anti-communist leader. Under the Field

¹ As events unfolded upcountry, I heard no more about the railroad contract.

² Many Thai males, especially government officials, had outlandish lifestyles. They partied hard and drank to excess, which eventually resulted in their early demise from cirrhosis of the liver. Thai women rarely resorted to the same activity.

Marshall's heavy-handed military dictatorship that encompassed most of the country, an intricate system of border police posts had been established with early warning radio capability located at even the most remote sites. With the ongoing erection of microwave radio towers scattered throughout the country to relay information to a central command, communications were good and constantly improving.

All sizeable northeastern towns were garrisoned with some first line military presence. Adjacent to the Air America compound, the sizeable Thai army camp maintained ten tanks, numerous trucks, and other rolling stock, presenting a sizeable mobile force. (Some of the equipment was proudly displayed at the annual December fair in City Park.) To support the army, several T-28s equipped with similar gun pods I had used during Pensacola gunnery training, were staged at the airfield. Airfields were home to numerous F-86 planes, a favorite foreign aid jet, at Don Muang. Ubon also sported a squadron of Australian F-86s.

Not a major concern at present, but should the Reds pour across the border in sizeable numbers, I knew from first-hand experience that the 7th Fleet could quickly deploy American troops and helicopters to Thailand. In addition, Iwakuni-based A4Ds were only an hour away.

We believed that the real problem lay in the covert penetration of the northeast by cells of individuals or solo personnel who could parachute in or enter the country in the guise of a monk and attempt to subvert ignorant villagers. Although late on a historical time line, the recent emphasis on interlocking border police posts and rural development education teams had made inroads in containing communist subversion.

In the letter, I mentioned that Molly, a Thai girl married to a Filipino mechanic went house to house on her motorbike

hawking muffins and pastries. ³

Buddy, Thisopa's nephew, returned from the United Nations drilling job in the northeast and stopped by the house. He looked good. Still friendly, he presently made 600 baht (thirty dollars) a month, about what he would have earned as an Air America Club waiter. Even more encouraging, he estimated that after a year the civil service pay would increase to 3,000 baht per month. (By Thai standards, this was the vast sum of one hundred and fifty dollars.)

At the Club, I talked to Earl Young, the drilling operation project manager, about the operation's success. He spoke glowingly of Buddy's work in the field. His team had actually discovered water, in addition to platinum, gold, and substantial oil deposits. With the communists already eyeing Thailand as a potential breadbasket, Young summarily capped all the finds to forestall Chinese intervention should the extent of Thai oil resources be revealed. At a time of unrest, later rumors surfaced that Buddy either possibly worked for the communists, or at least was a sympathizer. The unsubstantiated speculation stemmed from a period when he was helping to survey land at Nakhon Phanom for an airport, and some alarmist individuals became suspicious because the uneducated Thai easily read a compass and plotted coordinates on a map. Little thought was given to the fact that the youngster might have been highly intelligent and a quick learner. ⁴

³ Molly was the same girl mentioned in Book One-*Genesis*. She was the English-speaking daughter of the Mapakdi owner who was so helpful with language translations for the temporary Air America crews billeted there in 1961.

⁴ Dan Alston Interview, 09/22/99.

Completing my monologue to my parents, without much additional detail, and commenting about being relieved on the home front, I casually mentioned breaking up with Fairy. That, and the intense heat, obviously depressed me somewhat, for I indicated, "*I was becoming increasingly disenchanted with the Thai.*" Primarily, the largely unfamiliar tonal language grated on my nerves and the sing-song radio music was revolting.⁵

In contrast to my discontent, I did mention my admiration for the Thai peasant. I extolled the harsh life that existed for northeast farmers, mostly females clad in cheap black clothing and broad-brim conical hats, who performed the incomprehensible feat of toiling for hours in the rice fields under punishing rays from the burning sun. They must have been a hardy breed and it was little wonder that the working class's complexions were dark in this region. I did note that lighter skinned girls, preferring to remain that way, rarely exposed themselves to devastating sun rays. If venturing out during the heat of the day, they normally shielded themselves with an umbrella.

⁵ The predominately northeastern Lao music, known as the sing-song story-telling Molem, featured a reed instrument-the bamboo khene.



Northeast Thailand countryside following the rice harvest. Sugar palm trees provided delicious fruit, as well as daytime shade for workers.
Author Collection.

Acceding to Kong Le's request to bolster his forces utilizing several Air America planes, General Phoumi forwarded two Thakhet infantry battalions to fortify Moung Phanh to the west and Phou Theung on the southeast side of the Plain of Jars. Fearful that Kong Le's troops, in tandem with Phoumi's men, might launch a joint counterattack against the communists that most certainly would initiate civil war, Souvanna Phouma, as a last resort to maintain the status quo, journeyed to the Plain with hopes of arranging a cease-fire. All went well until he departed and the cease-fire ended.

In the meantime, diplomatic junketing continued between U.S. representatives and Geneva Accord co-chairmen to arrange an ICC-monitored cease-fire. However, not desiring to push the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese into the Chinese camp, unsurprisingly, the Soviets would not cooperate. A prime mover in diplomatic circles, Ambassador Harriman opined that the Russian commitment to the Geneva Accords was always limited, and there never was a true agreement between the two countries about the purpose of the Accords. Importantly, USG's entire Indochina strategy hinged on Lao neutralization, and this was contingent on Soviet support, as Khrushchev had promised Kennedy. Nevertheless, Harriman believed that the Soviets could still influence the Pathet Lao, Vietnamese, and Chinese actions in the Lao situation. ¹

¹ Ken Conboy, 99.
Laos: A New Civil War? *Time* 28 Apr. 1963: 30.
Norman Hannah 6.
Laos Crises, Memorandum for the Record, 467, 30 Apr. 1963.

ESTES AND CASTERLIN WALK TALL

An unexpected miracle occurred, but not without a liberal dose of pain. The Company upgraded Howard Estes to Captain. While flying near Phou Khe (Site-19), a tall mountain range overlooking Xieng Khouang Ville, he was wounded slightly in the leg by shrapnel. A couple of days later, after flying test flight patterns around the airfield, Abadie surprised him by announcing that he was now Captain Estes. Perhaps it was time, or a combination of factors like his wounding, letters to Rousselot, and the decision to reintroduce the H-34's into the war, that stimulated the upgrading. Howard was immediately scheduled upcountry. Working resupply missions for Long Tieng and Pop without benefit of maps, he confessed to being lost most of the time. ²

Knowing that Howard and his family had seriously considered leaving Air America, I was happy for him, but more than a little envious. There was still no word on my status and I did not bother to ask. Naturally, everyone wanted to know my fate. A sordid joke making the rounds indicated that I would require wounding to make Captain. Joking, Howard even offered to shoot me in the foot with his .25 caliber automatic pistol if it would help. Smacking of sour gallows humor, his quip was still funny. Afterward, I maintained my composure, hoping I would soon follow Howard to the same exalted rank.

Not long afterward a second miracle occurred. I **was** upgraded. After a deadhead movement to Vientiane on the 28th, Jim Coble, John Timmons, and I crewed CIC-2 to Udorn. Constituting an unannounced check ride for Captain, like a similar upgrading to Helicopter Aircraft Commander (HAC) with "Black Mac" McLennon at New River while in HMR-261, the exercise

² Howard Estes Phone conversation, 08/31/91.

was actually anticlimactic after enduring many frustrating months in a sub status with my peers. Jim, having flown with me before, required little out of the ordinary during the short trip. However, to test my response during a simulated engine failure, suddenly unannounced, he split the needles, dumped the collective, and slammed the left window closed to create a shock factor. The action was effective, and as I knew from my Marine Corps training, the only other item to add more realism to the maneuver would have been to switch off the auxiliary servo. No problem, I handled the simulated emergency as trained.

The final step up the ladder made me happy, but not overly elated. I considered it as something happening during the normal course of events. Still, it was easy to second guess what might have happened. Certainly, from the beginning, bad timing had been the real culprit. If I had not injured my leg, and passed the commercial helicopter license test the first time, I would have arrived in Udorn during August and most likely checked out with Elmer Munsell, the last newcomer upgraded at that time. Going back even further in time, this "what if" scenario did not factor in what might have occurred had I passed my first Quantico eye exam and gone to Pensacola on schedule in 1958 with the AOC contingent.

Upgrading of pilots was entirely a Company decision and generally included a large amount of discourse with Customer representatives. The Customer, who paid the bills, was always interested in keeping contract costs low, hence the reason for our extended tenure as First Officers.

I now enjoyed the status symbol a Captain title demanded. Added respect would be forthcoming with satisfactory performance and time, and my bitterness over the seven-month stint as a First Officer would fade. More importantly, my monthly pay almost doubled to 1,050 dollars. Project pay and hourly time

exceeding seventy hours also doubled to ten dollars, while night and dead head pay also increased. The increases added up to a much healthier monthly check, one that guaranteed greater remuneration should flight time increase as everyone envisioned. Of course, much of this speculation depended on a sufficient number of helicopters, a renewed fiscal contract, and U.S. military units remaining out of Laos. At any rate, I considered my patience infinite now that I could better afford to wait out the slow period at the increased wage. I felt more comfortable, knowing that I never could have earned 15,000 dollars a year working for a stateside corporation so soon after leaving the Corps.

Now that I was installed as a bona fide Captain, I enthusiastically told Ab that I would be available for **any** last-minute flight that might crop up and prove difficult for him to crew. Made during a state of exuberance, within a year, my words came back to haunt me when asked to take a flight after a late-night drinking bout. I took the flight, but it was not pleasant and I vowed never to fly the demanding machine again with a hangover.

During the final three days of April, the Plain of Jars situation appeared quiet. However, there was some question in individuals' minds if this interlude was because enemy tactics had changed to political and propaganda efforts, or a prelude to another large assault on Neutralist forces. Certainly, the 4,500 Meo supporting Kong Le's forces presented a negative influence on communist aggression. There was also supposition that the Prime Minister may have struck a deal with the Pathet Lao to affect the current cease-fire by further restricting aggressive Meo movements.

Complaints by Kong Le and Vang Pao that they were not receiving adequate support were discounted by CIA sources, which

indicated that field commanders' morale had elevated and improved since early April's dark days. ³

My first trip as a bona fide Captain entailed a CIC-1 ferry flight with Stan Wilson to Vientiane and back. While at Wattay Airport, I had a chance to talk to another French pilot who loathed ICC work because it entailed increased risk. He indicated that nobody showed respect for the distinctive white-painted birds. I had to laugh, for that was exactly our problem: every duck hunter, friend or foe, shot at our machines. That provided an excellent reason to fly at altitude when possible. Used to a cockpit double crew, I found flying solo quite a challenge at first. Without another cockpit member to assist with navigating, making decisions, and all other aspects of flying now depended solely on me. Of course, having been a squadron test pilot, it really was not the first time that I had flown solo pilot. I could only imagine what lay in store for me while working in unfamiliar areas in Laos.

SICK

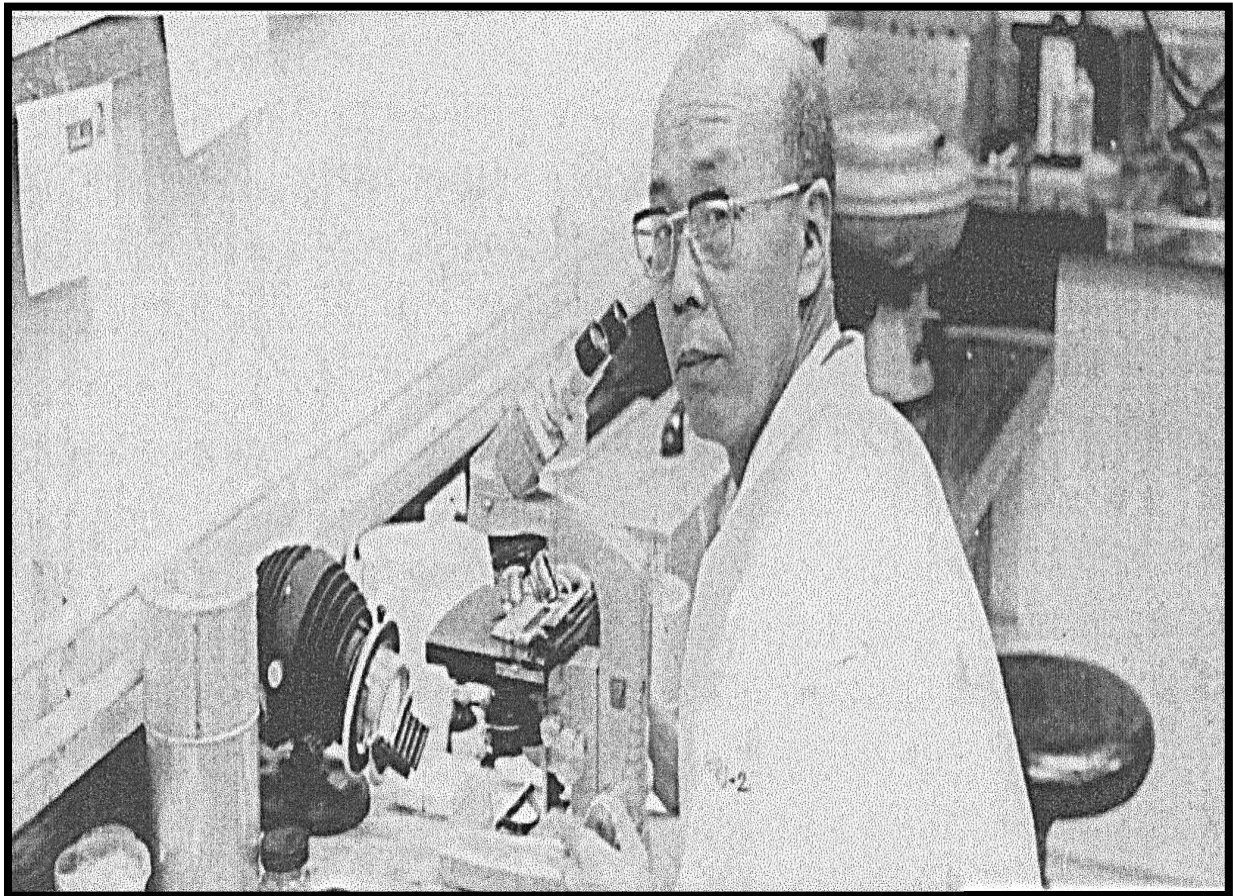
Early that evening, to celebrate our sudden rise out of semi-poverty and long-awaited upgrading (as in *Up from Slavery* by Booker T. Casterlin), Howard and I sprang for an hour or two of free drinks in the long, narrow Club bar sandwiched between the dining room and movie-conference room. In contrast to my days in the Corps, I rarely drank, and after three beers, tired and feeling a little unwell, I caught a B-bus to the Villa. While entering the lonely house, I suddenly developed a severe headache. Like being slugged by an enormous sledgehammer, it was the worst I could recall. Believing that I was possibly

³ Laos Crises 468 Memorandum from Michael V. Forrestal of the National Security Council Staff to President Kennedy. 1 May 1963.

developing a cold, seeking relief, I popped three aspirin, and then rubbed Tiger Balm, an Asian version of Musterole (later Vicks), liberally to my temples and forehead. Then, as the fumes from the Tiger Balm caused my eyes to water profusely, I collapsed onto the lumpy mattress. Although hot and smelly, the analgesic balm, touted as a cure-all remedy for Thai ills, did little to alleviate my pain, and I suffered a restless night with aching joints and a clanging headache.

Morning brought additional misery. With the condition no better, I desperately required medical help. Therefore, bent over, I half walked, half crawled to the main road where I lay down on the bank of a dry klong just below the road's shoulder. Fortunately, a Company passenger truck driver, responding to my weak, hailing gesture stopped, and the vehicle's occupants helped me onto the metal floor. By then, believing I had surely contracted cerebral malaria, dengue fever (also called Backwater Fever), or something worse, I attempted to ignore even the smallest bumps we hit that tended to magnify the torture of a constant throbbing in my head.

I should have remained home. The Company clinic, used mainly for periodic required medical examinations and injections, was seldom patronized by crews and families for anything more serious than a mild cold. The reason for this stemmed from a lack of Company money for proper pharmaceuticals and of confidence in the medical staff. Still, because of my wretched condition, I had little other choice. While I lay on the clinic table, old Doctor Kao gazed at me with a furrowed brow and proclaimed that I probably had influenza, a malady circulating the area. Then, as if I cared, he complained of also suffering from flu symptoms. I was really hurting at that point and it became obvious to me that I was not going to receive



Doctor Kao Hsueh Pu, head Air America flight surgeon at the clinic facility in Udorn.

Air America Log.

any sympathy or much help from the seemingly unconcerned and slightly amused "Doctor Rice." However, too weak and sick to become unduly upset, I just wanted some relief. The setting reminded me of the time in high school when I incurred a painful injury to neck ligaments while wrestling a considerably more experienced opponent at the vaunted West Point, Army Academy. Once back in Plainfield, my neck became so painful that I asked Dad to take me to the hospital for an x-ray. In manipulating my body to take the picture, the female technician laughed at my painful grimaces. I never understood her blasé attitude and some peoples' lack of compassion at others' suffering.

Next, the massive Chinese male nurse, who for obvious reasons we called the "Ghoul," stumbled toward me with a huge hypodermic syringe and even larger needle. Then, with a hideous grin, the slobbering giant jabbed and injected me with a sizeable amount of vitamin C. Thus "treated," after providing me with a large packet of aspirin, the medical team dispatched me to the house to spend a miserable day. All consideration of my projected Hong Kong trip to replenish my limited and tattered wardrobe was forgotten. All I thought about then was not dying, and getting well.

On the third, the headache subsided a little, but I still felt terrible. Concerned that I might have malaria, I did not want to face Kao and his gentle giant again. Therefore, now well enough to drive my motorbike, I visited the friendly U.S. Army Signal Corps doctor, who had aided me by providing antihistamine tablets when I suffered from a debilitating sinus condition the previous year. After hearing my symptoms, he apologized profusely and indicated he could not treat me. So many American employees, disgusted with our own medical facilities, had come to him for assistance that Air America management complained to his commanding officer. His hands were now tied. Taking pity on

me, he advised that there was a competent Thai Army doctor in town who conducted an after-hours clinic.

Early that evening, I visited Doctor Panya's clinic in town. During the day, the doctor staffed the Royal Thai Army hospital in the compound adjacent to the Air America facility. Complemented by his beautiful receptionist wife, in a typical Thai manner, the friendly man was sympathetic to my plight. After a brief examination, he assured me I had not contracted hepatitis, cerebral malaria, dengue fever, or any other of the area's esoteric diseases. Then, after stoking my confidence, he provided me with a couple of envelopes of pills and sent me home. Surviving another "Code of the East," I recovered from what was actually influenza, and hoped I would be immune for at least another six months.

Since touting belly warmers to help counter and ward off disease, and expounding on the merits of other Chinese folk medicines, Doctor Kao exposed himself to jokes and pranks. He was especially targeted by Billy Zeitler, who went to the clinic with a bruised sternum. Kao was diligent in his attempt to diagnose the ailment. After probing Bill for a time, he inquired if the pilot had ever previously suffered a similar complaint. Zeitler replied, *"Why yes, Doctor, I had a similar problem about three years ago."*

Without hesitation, Kao responded, *"Well, Captain Zeitler, I must inform you that whatever it was before, you have it again."* The classic remark was repeated many times over the years and became a standard that left the good doctor open to pilot fun and games.

Bill Zeitler always valued what he believed constituted a "harmless" trick. After Wayne Knight assumed the CPH position, Bill entered Wayne's office one day indicating he was going to perpetrate a joke on the often-gullible Doctor Kao.

The ploy involved a simulated sore throat. Bill had just eaten a number of anchovies and tiny bones lined his throat like thousands of paramecium cilium. Following the consultation, Bill did not have much to say concerning his trick. Wayne assumed that the light hearted Kao, a person he did not consider totally naïve, during the examination smelled the pungent anchovies, often used in Chinese cooking, and realized he was being duped. However, maintaining his professional demeanor, and Oriental calm, the wise old bird prescribed something for Bill to take.⁴

In the future there would be other attempts by our pilots to trick the kindly old doctor. The stories always made the rounds in the bar, but the pranks were generally transparent to Kao, and rarely disrupted the clinic's operation.

⁴ EW Knight Email, 06/01/00.

While I recovered from the unknown malady, on 3 May, communist artillery and automatic weapons fire near Khang Khay downed two ICC H-34s. One was only slightly damaged during the incident, the other not deemed recoverable. The French pilot with whom I had conversed in Vientiane spoke about the incident with a straight tongue. Even with government permission, the hazards of flying into enemy-controlled zones were indeed perilous. CIC-2, originally Hotel Yankee (bureau number 148805), was too badly damaged, and was abandoned. Within a month, Air America replaced the aircraft with Hotel Alpha (bureau number 144644), the first bailed Marine Corps UH-34D placed in service 20 December 1960 in Vientiane. It was re-designated CIC-6. ^{1 2}

The episode constituted yet another enemy warning to avert outside snooping in their territory, and a timely resolution to the Plain of Jars fracas. Almost from the beginning of hostilities, Souvanna Phouma had sought the International Controls Commission's help in maintaining the cease fire and mediating differences, but the communists initially blocked visits. Supporting this stance, perhaps the worst offender was Marek Thee, the Polish ICC (communist) representative. In protest, USG bitterly complained about Thee's obstructionist tactics in preventing timely investigations of foreign troops' alleged presence in Laos. Alluding to his specific interests in the Pathet Lao, and failure to provide a person for an ICC

¹ Doctor Joe Leeker, The Aircraft of Air America (University of Texas at Dallas, 15 August 2003)

² Parts of CIC-2 were salvaged in 1964 and when the Maintenance Department was capable, the ship was rebuilt at Udorn. It reemerged as Hotel-48 in 1967.

peacekeeping team to be established on the Plain of Jars, and his behavior following the Pathet Lao attack on the clearly marked white H-34s, Thee was soon recalled. The Commission's non-communist members' attitude that the ICC should not act except on a unanimous basis, or appeal to the Accords mechanism for action, certainly reinforced Thee's stance. The Canadian and Indian representatives believed that they had to preserve the Commission's ability to function, and nothing should ever disturb the balance in the Royal Lao Government. ³

Confusing the issue even more, NHL leaders requested, and then demanded, a return to Vientiane. They wanted adequate security, demilitarization, neutralization of Vientiane, and a mixed police force. Naturally, the leftists' demands were refused.

Within a few days of the ICC shooting, to consolidate gains, Pathet Lao units attacked the newly arrived FAR battalions. A Meo counterattack in the Xieng Khouang Ville area was thwarted, and information surfaced that three new Vietnamese battalions had entered the province. ⁴

ENGINES

Extreme heat and humidity had taken a high toll in H-34 engines during the first week in April, resulting to very little flight time for our group. Estes, Reid, and Weitz experienced failures, and all conducted successful landings. Constituting the first power plant failures since I arrived in Udorn, I considered the series unusual and sought an explanation from

³ Lao Crisis, Memorandum from the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs (Harriman) to the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy), 469, 7 May 1963. Mike Forrestal and Roger Hilsman circa Jan 63.

⁴ Ken Conboy 99.

Chief Mechanic, John Aspinwall. John, one of the most affable and knowledgeable maintenance men I ever met, patiently described some engine problems encountered during the hot season. He also indicated that like the failure that spoiled my day in the Crotch, at least one of the engines had swallowed a sodium filled exhaust valve. Over the years, stateside facilities overhauled many of our engines at least three or more times. Because of either cost or outright negligence, overhaul personnel failed to replace old or worn cylinder valves and valve springs in all cases. Consequently, because of the harsh climatic conditions intensified during April, and metal fatigue, engine parts were failing.

Because of the diminished H-34 fleet and continuing daily requirements upcountry, a rumor circulated that the thirteen helicopters previously reverted to the Corps would shortly be returned to us. Certainly not a product of the defunct Rumor-a-Day club, perhaps emanating through channels from upper management, or purely wishful thinking, the rumor turned out to be nothing more than someone's pipe dream.

Helicopter engines were not the only motors affected by the climate. My motorbike, running poorly since Duane Meyers allegedly repaired it, finally gave up the ghost. A teardown revealed a broken crankshaft. Curiously, for such a popular Honda model, the parts were not available in Udorn. Therefore, I asked crews to check the Vientiane area for one, with Bangkok the next place to explore for the part.

STARCOM

I began flying again on the 14th. However, as **the** junior Captain in our group, I had to wait my turn in the queue for upcountry work, and was initially assigned trash flights. This one involved hauling groceries, mail, and pay to Army STARCOM

personnel located at remote radio relay sites throughout the northeast.

The STARCOM acronym was used in lieu of Strategic Army Communications Net, a re-designation for U.S. Army Command and Administration Network, which used high-frequency radio systems to communicate with Southeast Asia. Since conclusion of the First Indochina War, two-way communication between Viet Nam and the Pacific Command headquarters located on Hawaii was important for strategic planning. With the increased frequency of enemy attacks in South Vietnam, and accelerated tensions in Laos during 1960, planners foresaw an ever-widening conflict, and perceived merit in expanding Southeast Asian communications.

By early 1962, "Backporch," a new more efficient system utilizing troposcatter and ion scatter propagation was authorized by the Department of Defense to connect major cities in South Vietnam and Thailand. Ubon, Thailand, was one location chosen. However, by mid-1963, high-frequency radio was still the only reliable means of establishing out-of-country communications, and the number of frequencies available was necessarily limited.⁵

STARCOM folks had really been kind to Air America personnel in the recent past by allowing us use of their post exchange (PX), Army post office (APO), medical, and occasionally the mess hall facilities during holidays. Because of the good relationship, we attempted to assist them in kind. Flying Hotel Bravo with old Untalan (who I called Puns), we flew to Sakon Nakhon and the curiously-named outlying sites, Donut, Coffee, and Echo.

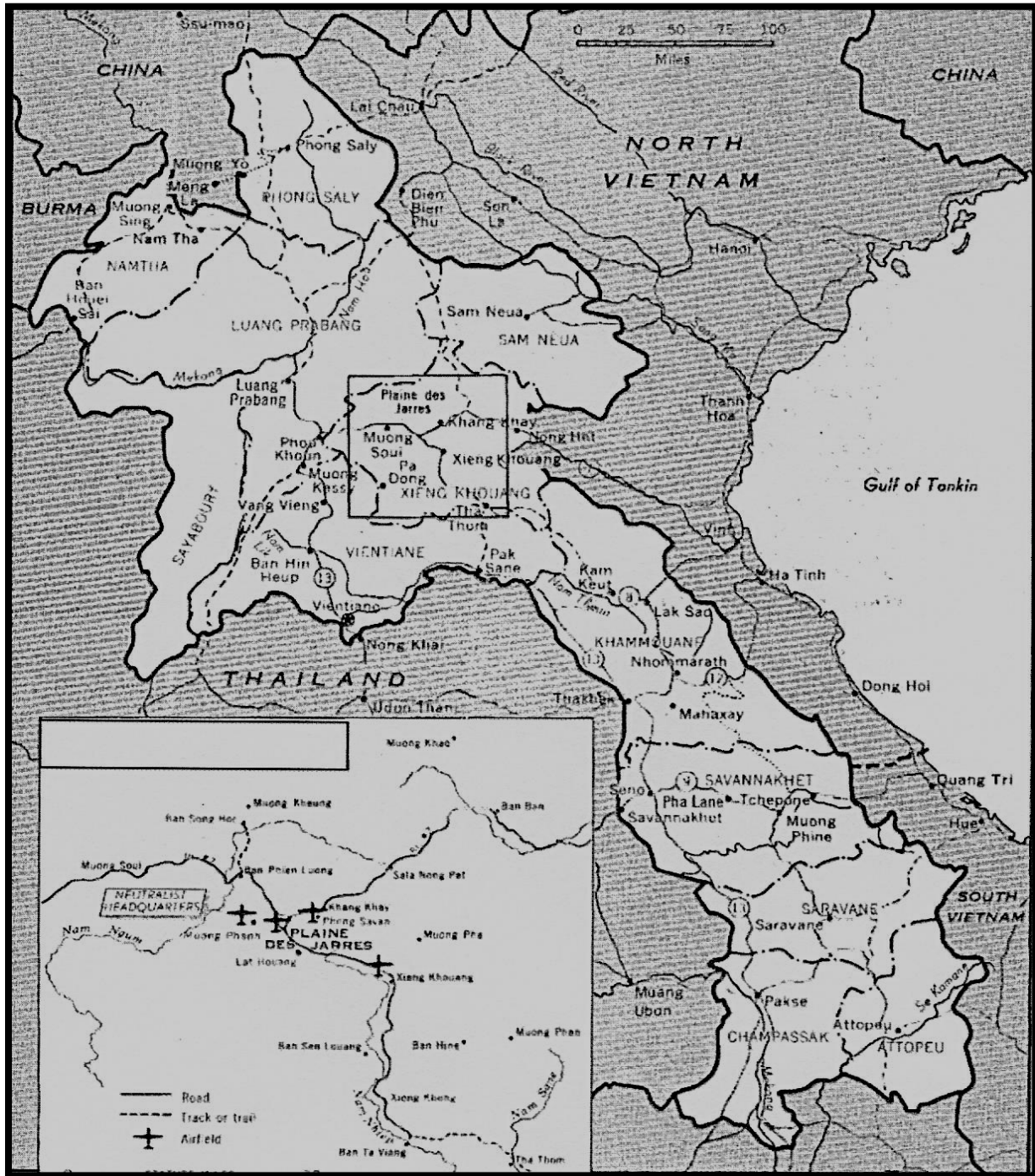
⁵ Josef Rohus, *1951-1963 From Rice Paddy to STARCOM Station: Early American Strategic Communications in Vietnam* (pageneers, org/Chapter1.html).

PDJ

Upcountry, responding to early May's relative quiet, on 11 May Kong Le, Vang Pao, and a Phoumist leader planned a counterattack to retake Xieng Khouang Ville, Lat Houang, and Nong Pet, with smaller movements conducted against Khang Khay and Ban Ban. Action would commence on the 16th. Because the plan required coordination between parties who had normally never trusted or worked well together in the past, U.S. Embassy staff and the ambassador did not condone such an ambitious effort. Not wanting offensive actions taken, fearful that such aggression could initiate a strong enemy counterattack that might chase government forces entirely off the Plain of Jars, Souvanna Phouma, along with State, concurred. It was not USG's policy to initiate conflict, but to await communist hostilities and curry world opinion against them. Besides, Souvanna was still hoping to achieve diplomatic and political means to reaching an accord.

Therefore, lacking USG support, the major operation to retake lost territory was canceled. Thus thwarted, but with FAN and FAR forces already pre-positioned to strike, government units blocked Route-4 east and west of Xieng Khouang Ville. Later, small attacks were launched along the eastern PDJ at Lat Houang and Phong Savan to cripple road traffic. Unhappy with the unscheduled events, the Prime Minister intervened, appealing for the units to initiate only defensive actions. After some consultation, Vang Pao agreed to limit future operations, only targeting enemy lines of communication (LOCs).

In the meantime, learning of the proposed 16 May offensive, and deciding to conduct preemptive action on the 15th, the enemy began shelling the Moung Phanh airstrip and Kong Le's headquarters. After an ICC team landed at Moung Phanh to investigate, incoming fire from enemy 85mm "Long Tom" artillery



Insert displays the areas on the Plain of Jars joint Lao government forces planned to capture. The plan was eventually scrapped in lieu of diplomatic and political solutions.

Map from CIA Bulletin, Daily Brief, 05/14/63.

ceased for two weeks. However, when the ICC team departed the Plain on 31 May, shelling resumed and even intensified.

Following two years of attempting to strengthen the Lao military and cobble together a lasting political settlement, it was abundantly clear that North Vietnamese leaders would not permit country unification under Western auspices, or their Pathet Lao flunkies, to participate in the existing government.⁶

CURIOUS SCHEDULING

On the day communist forces began shelling Moung Phanh, the Operations Department assigned me to work JUSMAG Bangkok for a projected ten-day period. In an often-repeated pattern, I would replace Captain Mike Marshall and assume command of Hotel-14. After alerting Sang La of my projected absence and locking up the house, I parked my sick bike at the airfield as a security measure. Late that afternoon Bob Hamblin drove me to the big city in the Bird & Son twin Beech Baron. Bob, a naturally friendly person, was well liked and respected by most Air America pilots.

I discovered that the employee flap over the required Plaza residence had subsided and we were now allowed to billet at any reasonable accommodation within the range and scope of the B-bus driver. I suppose additional transportation department vehicles or fewer crews had contributed to this new policy.

Someone recommended the 447 Guest House located on South Satorn Road that was operated by two middle-age Thai sisters. As an inexpensive and clean alternative, I decided to try it. I was not disappointed. Situated in a quiet portion of the city, one entered a sizable courtyard that stepped up to the main building

⁶ Victor Anthony, 83-84.
Tom Ahern, 155-158.

containing several single rooms facing the courtyard. Inside, I found the appointments simple, but adequate.

Since the following day's mission entailed flying a Special Forces unit into the northeast for five days in the field, and required an early launch, I retired after supper. At the far end of the line for crew pick-ups, I arose at 0415 hours and hustled through my toilet, preparing for a 0430 bus arrival.

After descending stairs to the courtyard, I discovered that transportation had not arrived, so I amused myself by gazing at a black Mynah bird perched in a large iron bar cage. Because of its strategic location in the courtyard, I assumed the bird was the sisters' favorite. While we closely peered at each other, the bird suddenly bobbed, cocked its head, and loudly chirped a single word-**Farang**. I was aware that avian lovers could teach this species to talk, but I was unprepared for this isolated outburst. *How in the world did this yellow beaked animal know I was a foreigner? Was it my silly gray uniform and bush hat, or some other visual cue?* Scratching my head, I wandered to the B-bus waiting at the curb.

Perhaps as a MAAG requirement, or more likely to obtain additional flight time for the month, Bill Zeitler and Joe Marlin joined me at the airport. Alas, at least for part of the mission, I was again relegated to a second pilot status. We stopped at the northern Lop Buri camp to load passengers, then launched for Udorn. After refueling and debarking Billy, I flew to Pak Chom and Ban Muong Phrae. A tired cowboy, I recovered late at Udorn with slightly more than ten hours logged.

The next day, ACP Jim Coble accompanied me on another trip to Phrae. I was not sure whether his purpose entailed a progress check, or Jim was merely interested in the mission. Perhaps it was a little of both. During the western journey, while passing over a remote Thai police compound, Jim informed me that all

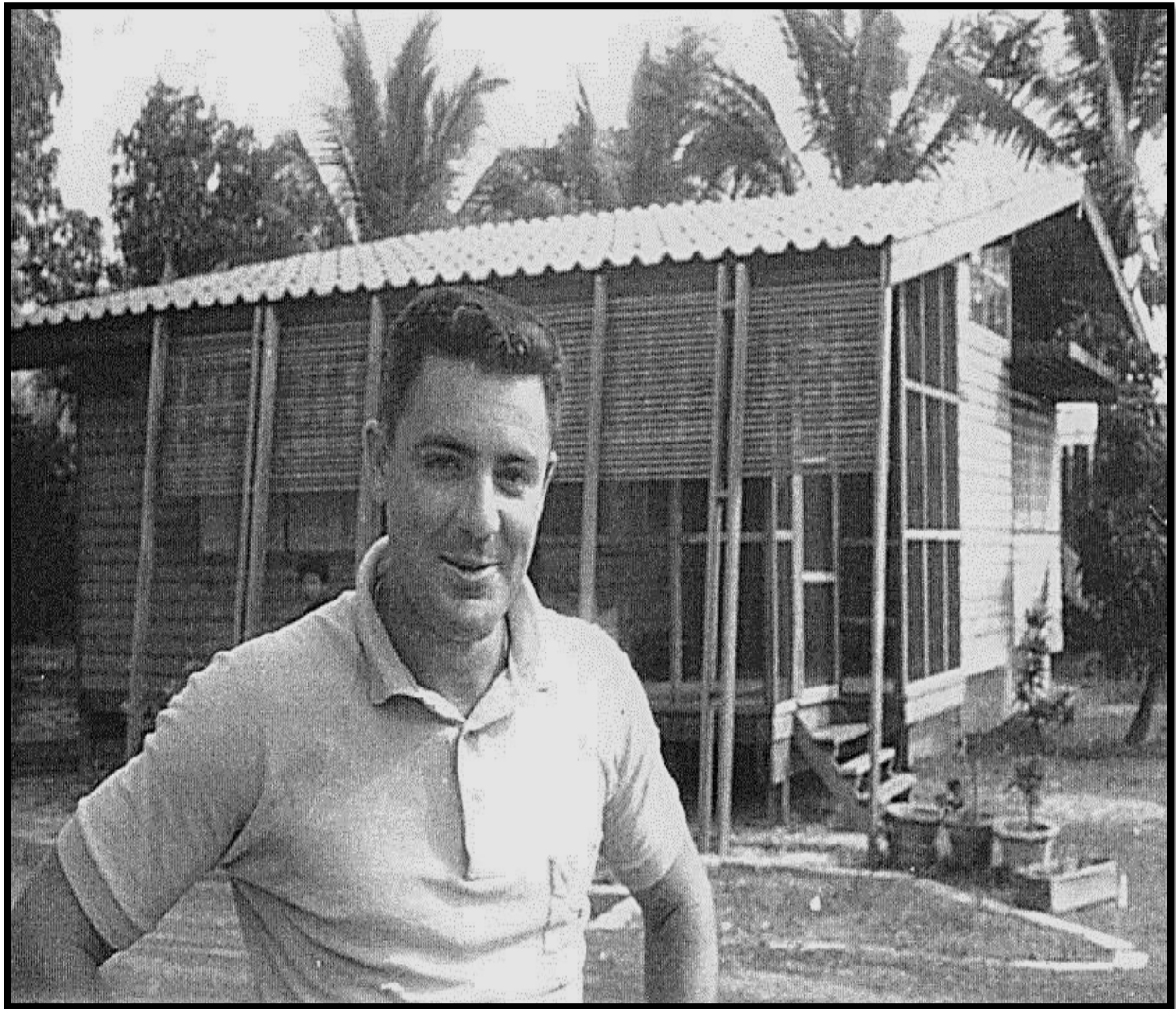
police posts stocked drums of emergency aviation fuel, usually green colored 100/115 octane gasoline. Although we burned 115/145, the engine would accept a lower grade for short periods with a required notation entered in the logbook.

During the day, while broadcasting an "operations normal" call to home base, we were informed that our mission was canceled and we were recalled. Evidently increased fighting in Laos took priority over the JUSMAAG contract, and Hotel-14 was urgently required upcountry.

While returning to Udorn and passing low over the forested Phu Phan hills (not to be confused with the mountains south of Sakon Nakhon) west of the city, I spied a magnificent black panther leaping over the treetops and tangled vines. From his left seat, Jim missed this rare sighting, the first I had observed since flying in Southeast Asia. When we landed, senior Captains Wayne Knight and Sam Jordon were waiting patiently to fly the aircraft to Sam Tong for an anticipated four-day RON.

LEISURE TIME

For some time, with little else to occupy our days, a few of us had gathered during the morning at Charlie Weitz and Bill Pearson's bungalow in the Chet compound for the purpose of drinking a few beers and discussing latest developments. With a closed-mouth management loath to provide tangible information, the sessions provided us the only semi-private spot to vent our spleens without fear of retribution and to feel somewhat human. Rumors were still rife, the latest inferring that with the earlier loss of two birds, the ICC wanted two more of our H-34s. If our mentors authorized such a transfer, with the ships currently out of service, we would be left with only two or three operational machines to perform projected upcountry work.



Author posing in front of Charlie Weitz and Bill Pearson's tin roofed Bungalow in Mister Chet's Compound.

Nick Burke Collection circa April 1963.

Perhaps preparing us for the inevitable, more bad news circulated indicating that when the Madriver contract was renewed in June, a large reduction in pilot force to about eight would be necessary.

One day at our gathering, Billy P with a snoot full of beer, impulsively decided that he needed to go downtown. As he stepped into his silver Italian Vespa, we cautioned him not to attempt the journey in his present condition. Ignoring our warning, the hard-headed blond revved up the engine, tooled out the gate, and then, failing to turn right, promptly surged across the lane into the klong. Except for his ego, Pearson was unhurt and received absolutely no sympathy from us I-told-you-so types. The incident did provide the highlight of the day, and we found much mirth at Billy's discomfort.

Rivaling Weitz, there were as many Tom Moher stories as the day was long. One related to Tom's unnatural fear of dying. While sucking up a few brews at Charlie's house, Tom passed out. Thinking it would be great sport to "lay" Tom out, Charlie removed every item from a large bamboo coffee table he had purchased from town. Then he and others present lifted the sleeping victim onto the table and positioned candles at Tom's head and feet. Still not finished, Charlie crossed Tom's arms across his chest and placed a spray of flowers in his hand. With Tom's wake assured, all departed for the airfield. When the maid entered the house and saw the apparition, the terrified girl uttered a piercing scream. Tom woke with a start and, observing his condition, emitted an even louder scream. Not amused by Charlie's prank, he departed in a huff.

Tom, an avid reader, read Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* and recommended the unusual book to friends. To all, it was obvious

that the part concerning a nude Yossarian sitting in a tree made a distinct impression on him. ⁷

From this emerged an even more bizarre story. Sometime later, Tom and Kathy were drinking in town with friends. After quaffing a few brews and feeling the effects, Tom indicated that he wanted to go home. However, Kathy had other plans, replying in broken English, "*No, I happy. I smoke a cigar (all the ladies were doing this), drink a drink, and sit here and talk.*"

Tom, knowing there was no way he would ever change his wife's mind answered, "*Well, you can sit here smoke, drink, and talk all night long. I'm going home.*" Then he hired a samlor for the long ride to his house. ⁸

He arose in the middle of the night and stumbled to the bathroom, still drunk and nude, sleeping that way since reading Heller's book. Not seeing Kathy, and a bit mentally confused, he decided to go out and find her. Without taking into consideration his lack of attire, he found a samlor willing to take the "crazy American" to town. Discovering that Tom had no money to pay for the trip, the driver angrily deposited him in front of the Prachapakdi Hotel, where Tom lay down on a stone bench and fell asleep.

Later, a pilot rushed into the establishment where Kathy and the others were still drinking and yelled, "*Hey, Tom Moher is sleeping on a stone bench at the hotel, naked as a Jay Bird.*"⁹

⁷ Joe Heller, *Catch-22* (NY, NY, Simon & Schuster, 1961) 271.

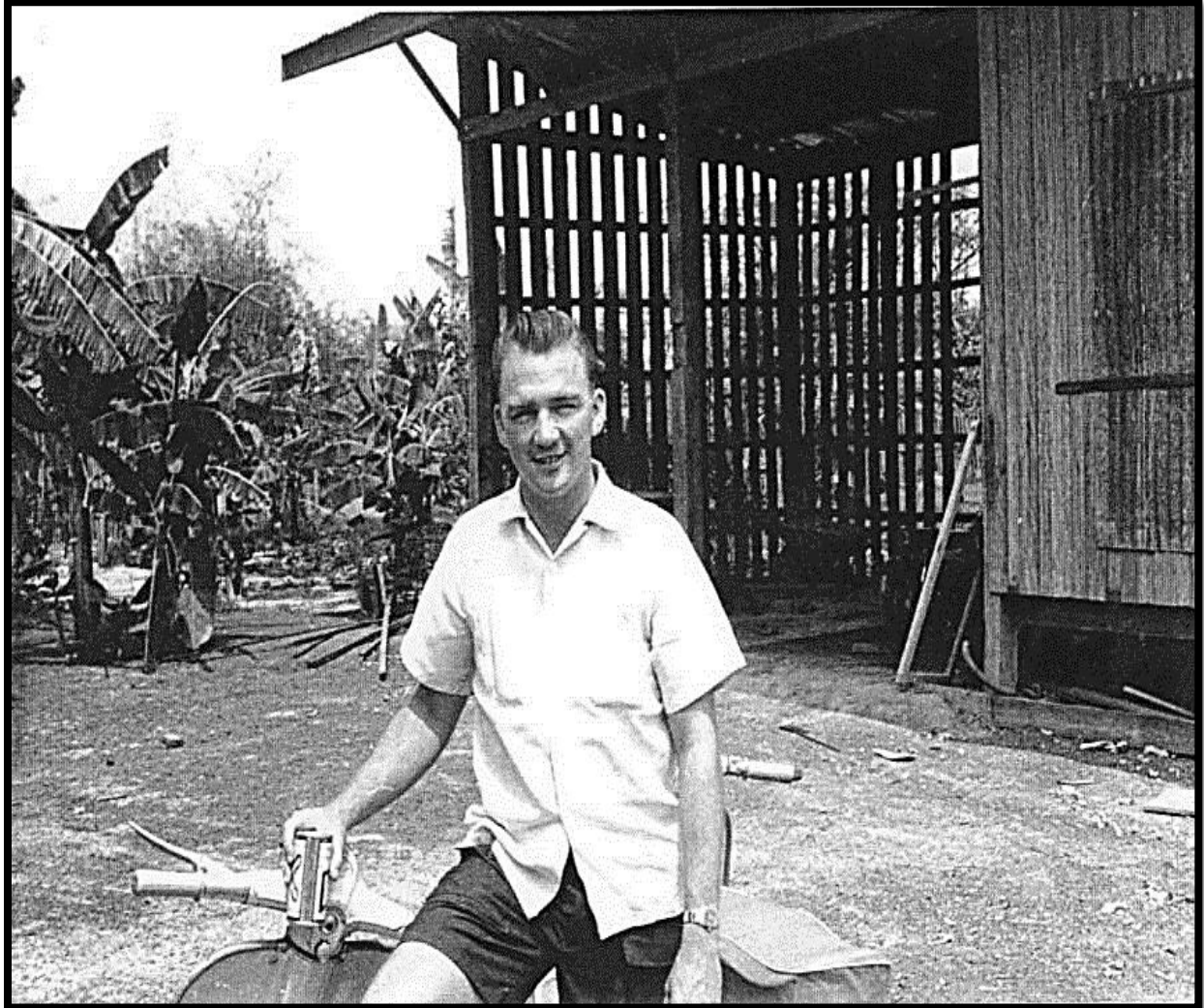
⁸ Raised in New York City, with available public transportation, Tom Moher had never driven a car or any other vehicle.

⁹ Dan Alston Interview, 09/22/99.

NIGHT ACTIVITY

Under the Civil Air Transport umbrella, reciprocal airline agreements for travel were available to Air America Captains. One of the finest discounts was with the German airline, Lufthansa. A ninety percent round trip discount on first class cost only 200 dollars, and if everything went as planned, allowed an individual to fly to New York and return on an extended STO. Hearing glowing reports about the airline and its amenities, Billy Z took advantage of a quick trip. Learning that my bike was broken, he kindly offered me his 125cc motorbike to drive during his absence.

While Bill was in CONUS, Charlie Weitz, Jack Connor, and I, sated after consuming a supper of a couple bowls of egg-noodle soup and brews at a Chinese shop between the first and second circles, decided to cruise town. Long ago, a culinary expert in the group had discovered this shop, and we patronized it as the premier establishment, which served what we considered the finest noodles in town. A short, obese male cook brewed and stirred the steaming broth in a huge copper caldron. Thickening the mixture and enhancing flavor, he occasionally tossed in a plucked whole duck (feet, head and all) or a pig liver. Fraught with local color, it was almost as interesting watching him prepare the broth as eating the delicious product. Seemingly in charge of the entire soup operation, the young man not only doled out the broth, he also collected patron's money. One bowl cost a very reasonable three baht (fifteen cents), five baht was required for additional slices of red pork or liver to satisfy the larger "Farang" appetites. Sometimes, if especially hungry at supper, I consumed three bowls of the fortified version for the U.S. dollar equivalent of seventy-five cents.



Charlie Weitz, libation in hand, wearing the "uniform of the day" while leaning against a scooter.

Nick Burke Collection March-April 1963.

Weitz, known by his peers as "Good Time Charlie," was a compulsive free spender and renown for accommodating all hangers on. He loved to brag that he did not consider his Hong Kong STO successful unless he spent at least 1,000 dollars per day. However, despite his normal excesses, at this particular noodle shop, he set the record as the world's most stubborn tightwad.

Invariably, in what became almost an established ritual, when leaving, Charlie and the fat cook argued over the cost of his soup. To me, it appeared that they actually enjoyed the hassling over what generally amounted to a meager ten cents. Aside from an occasional chest bumping, the acrimony never resulted in serious bodily harm, and Charlie generally left after paying three baht.

As we prepared to leave the establishment, mechanic Billy Palmer spied our assorted bikes and pulled up on his machine. From his jocularly, it appeared that Billy had already tossed off a few beers at the Club after work. Joining up in formation, we drove four abreast into town looking for fun or mischief, whatever came first--pilots and crewmembers do things like that. As usual, and following the nightly ritual, except for our favorite noodle shop, by 2100 hours, shop front wooden doors were tightly shuttered along the entire street. Although an occasional stray dog rummaged for discarded morsels of food, the area was devoid of humanity or other mammals. Bored and tired of cruising, we stopped to discuss the next plan of action. Deciding to make another circuit before returning to our respective houses, we began revving up our engines. In the process of manipulating his throttle and engaging the clutch, Billy enthusiastically over-revved the engine. The sudden throttle burst torqued the drunken bike's front end up and completely over on its back. Bill pitched hard against the pavement, incurring considerable "Honda Rash" to his arms and

pride. Cut and bleeding, with his pathetic cries ringing in our ears, we escorted him home.

While Palmer collapsed into bed laughing and moaning, half from the accident, half from the alcohol, we thirsty revelers opened his refrigerator and discovered a bottle of wine. While the others giggled and downed the booze, as the ranking pseudo-medic, I attempted to minister to the still hemorrhaging and whimpering soul. After some searching, I discovered a bottle of iodine. When the trusting youngster proffered his injured arm to me, I told him to brace himself and poured the mixture liberally onto the ragged macadam induced abrasions. The effect of the iodine was immediate. Now Bill really had something tangible to curse and yell about. Highly vocal, his howling chased us unsympathetic bystanders from the house. Despite my tactless gesture, I likely saved Billy's arm from grievous infection that night.

As one of Ben Moore's planned activities sponsored by bar profits and calculated to lift our spirits, on the 19th, Club Manager Rusty Phillips scheduled an all-hands pig roast. Filipino employees, the only people who knew how to cook the meat properly, agreed to dig a fire pit behind the Club and tend to the porkers. As a clever innovation, the three heavy animals were spitted using discarded long H-34 tail rotor drive shafts. The meat simmered on hot coals from 0500 to 1400 hours, while we stood around the pit, quaffed beer, inhaled the delicious aromas, and told jokes. Recalling the San Jose, Mindoro mayor's party during the Tulungan operation, that was the second-best tasting pork I ever ate. The party was a huge success, but with the invasion of facility workers, the succulent meat did not last very long. We all vowed to do it again.

Continuing social events, toward month's end the Club sponsored a champagne dinner dance calculated to keep the masses

occupied. With a number of out-of-town people attending, including Customer types and wives, as an out-of-place bachelor, I stayed home.

Ben's attempts to raise employee morale by building the Club and scheduling activities had already paid huge dividends. However, the air-conditioned Mecca became so popular that he soon discovered it was difficult to keep people out of the facility and on the job. In addition, families spent the entire day there with the ladies playing bridge in the lounge. Moreover, as kids will be kids, the rowdier ones tore around the compound, highly aggravating the Project Manager.¹⁰

Four days later, I was assigned yet another trash flight. It entailed ferrying the CIC-1 helicopter from Vientiane to Udorn for maintenance. Actually, the trip afforded me an opportunity to purchase canned milk and other scarce commodities from the embassy commissary to restore the meager larder at my house.

¹⁰ Ben Moore May 1963 Monthly Report to Taipei.

Twenty-nine May 1963 marked my first upcountry trip as a Captain. I was not alone on the flight north, for Mike Marshall went along with me in the cockpit and also logged flight hours. It was a legal doubling-up process allowed at the time while relieving another pilot, but one which did not endure long. My mission: fly to Sam Tong to exchange Hotel-13 with Hotel-14, due for a hundred-hour maintenance inspection in Udorn. Unless there were gripes listed in the logbook, these inspections did not entail much more than changing lubricating fluids, checking filters, sump plugs, and cleaning the aircraft.

Consistent with overnight turnarounds, the maintenance department dragged Hotel-14 out of the barn with a motorized tug and onto the flight line the following day. Following a short test flight, the machine was released for operations. During the next two days, I again serviced STARCUM radio relay sites in the northeast with supplies and pay. Except for Echo, the new sites were named Roundtable, Donut, Coffee, Roundtree, Roadrunner, Little Dipper, Cornpatch, Shortcake, and the town of Roi Et south of Kalasin.

ATOG

The increase in Plain of Jars activity required more cargo plane supply drops. This in turn resulted in problems within the Air America Air Transportation Operations Group (ATOG), perhaps rendered complacent by the relatively low level of requirements following the Geneva Accords signing the previous year. The problem reached a zenith when Dave Hickler's office intercepted a copy of a letter from Vientiane USAID Director, Charles Mann, to



Southwestern view of the Udorn flight line parking area and taxiway to the runway. White H-34 at the far end of the right line is an International Control Commission (CIC) ship from Vientiane at Udorn for scheduled maintenance.

Nick Burke Collection March-April 1963.

Customer Frank Daly complaining about ATOG and its escalating incompetence.

Hickler, referring the problem to the head shed, twixed Grundy regarding Mann's letter and the need to install a capable ATOG manager. He also cited a necessity for procedures to log arriving and departing goods, and to keep accurate records to account for cargo movement. Additionally, controls were deemed necessary to efficiently schedule cargo aircraft.

Despite personnel changes, ATOG problems continued for two months. By July, Hickler reminded Bob Rousselot that ATOG was the focal and control point, and planning body to handle the majority of routine and clandestine functions of traffic, cargo, planning, scheduling, and special problems. With this in mind, Dave launched into impassioned arguments to negate Dale Means' imminent transfer to Saigon. He had good reasons. Means had gained special qualifications that stemmed from knowledge of Customer requirements emanating from the Air Support Branch, and special requirements from other areas that entailed special handling (clandestine operations). For these tasks, at a great expenditure of time and effort, he received additional classified knowledge. Then, to no avail, Hickler lobbied for Means' advancement to ATOG Manager.

Because Mann continued complaining to the contracting officer about ATOG, Dave forwarded another letter to the Air America President explaining the situation. In the missive, stating that ATOG management was poor to non-existent, Mann questioned the methods of storage and distribution of goods in the Quonset hut warehouse. When queried by Mann's representative, the individual in charge at the time provided no acceptable answers. He noted a full warehouse with an unknown quantity of haphazardly deposited rice. In addition to the lack

of an apparent handling system, there was no resolution between Sam Tong and Air America records regarding rice distribution.

The scathing accusations triggered a meeting in Taipei between most Company shakers and movers. President Grundy noted that it was important that the ATOG operation be conducted efficiently, and improvements implemented to retain the contracts. To improve the situation, by early August Bart Brigida moved into the ATOG Manager slot, and his efforts to improve ATOG lived up to all expectations. ¹

Believing Pathet Lao assaults imminent on FAN positions, Souvanna Phouma and Neutralist commanders requested Air America planes deliver 105mm howitzers and heavy 4.2mm mortars to the Plain of Jars as soon as possible in order to hold key defensive positions. According to State, so far, Air America had only overtly delivered food and clothing to the Meo and Kong Le. Without specifying details, ammunition ("Hard Rice") airdrops were covert. The communists, already challenging Air America's legal status and calling the Company a paramilitary organization, demanded an ICC investigation into its activities. After deliberation, State movers and shakers, concerned over adverse reactions from the Brits, the ICC, and world opinion, initially demurred, opting to delay and curtail using Air America assets to deliver requested items unless an actual enemy attack was forthcoming and FAR C-47s were unable to supply the FAN in time. However, they realistically noted possible difficulty in major resupply missions during the upcoming rainy

¹ Bill Leary Notes for 1963.
Dave Hickler Letter to Rousselot, 07/17/63.
Minutes of ATOG meeting, 08/08/63.

season.²

THE CHINESE FACTOR

Following the Korean War and the Indochina settlement with the French government, the Mainland Chinese military forces were constrained by the SEATO alliance on the southern flank, and South Korea and Taiwan to the east. Later in the 1950s, China and the Soviet Union's ideology diverged, animosity ensued, and the country became effectively surrounded by hostile elements. Therefore, when Souvanna Phouma, then leader of the second tiered government at Khang Khay, visited Peking in the spring of 1961 seeking help negotiating a ceasefire, and requested that China develop a road from Yunnan into Laos, their leaders responded positively. With Phong Saly province loyal to Souvanna, the formal agreement was signed during January 1962. After the Geneva Accords signing in July, the new Prime Minister sent Phoumi Nosavan to Peking to cement the road building agreement. During the talks, Phoumi was reputed to have asked that the road be extended to Nam Tha. Taking maximum advantage of this request, Radio Peking broadcast plans for future construction projects to Ban Houei Sai (clear creek), but the royal Lao government (RLG) never approved more than an original road to Phong Saly.

While events on the Plain of Jars early in 1963 required American leadership attention, Chinese armed sentries guarded construction sites, 10,000 laborers completed a laterite road from Meng La in southern Yunnan province to Phong Saly town. After completion, the artery was formally dedicated to the RLG,

² Edward Keefer and Glenn LaFantasie eds, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963 Lao Crises: Memorandum from Michael V. Forrestal of the National Security Council Staff to President Kennedy 29 May 1963* (Washington: USG Printing Office, #473).

and the workers were withdrawn to China. By setting a precedent that forecast additional future road projects in Military Region One, Phong Saly effectively succumbed to Chinese influence and de facto annexation.

Souvanna Phouma and Phoumi should have known better than to deal with the crafty Chinese, for, as the King of Laos, Savang Vatthana, divulged to President Kennedy in February: Centuries ago, people of Laos and the Empire of Annam had historically been Chinese vassals. Now, intending to re-establish rule over entire Southeast Asia, their leaders would use multiple forms of action, and communist ideology was only one tool applied by the Chinese to penetrate Southeast Asia to achieve these aims. His Majesty added that the Chinese could never accept the fact that the Lao would escape their influence for that of the West. This was equally true for the Soviets. ³

There was still no word from management regarding the Madriver contract renewal, but rumors circulated that we would receive more helicopters. Of course, our jaded minds rejected this as a dream, one calculated to raise our flagging morale.

PERSONAL WEAPON

Despite the official CYA Company gun policy, with our return to Laos, personal protection, particularly during a hairy survival situation, weighed heavily on my mind. After being blasted with Tom Moher the previous year, I was cognizant of the dangerous aspects of flying almost anywhere in the country, and the general consequences of a forced landing in denied territory. We did carry a bulky survival kit containing a .22

³ G. McMurtrie Godley and Jinny St Goar, *The Chinese Road in Northwest Laos 1961-73*, 291.
Edward Keefer and Glenn LaFantasie, *Lao Crises* 445; Memorandum of Conversation 02/27/63.

caliber rifle, but it was not easily accessible in case of an emergency and hasty evacuation from the cockpit. Besides, almost every pilot and American Flight Mechanic carried some form of personal weapon upcountry, generally in the form of a handgun.

Without official approval, realistic local management provided lockers for weapons in the security office. When scheduled for flights into Laos, crewmembers retrieved and secured their weapon in an individual RON bag stored in the cargo compartment. Then, if required, it became incumbent on the Flight Mechanic to produce the gun. It was not the best of all worlds, but far better than venturing naked into harm's way. With these thoughts in mind, I learned that John Timmons possessed a .357 magnum he wanted to sell. While examining it, I discovered that it appeared too much gun for my small hand. However, as I knew that I was next in line to RON at Sam Tong, I accepted it on consignment and would purchase the weapon if it met my expectations.

Chief of Security, Jim Baron, was in his office when I locked up my newest acquisition. As our resident non-sanctioned, undercover gun dealer, he had collected an assortment of weapons after the Company first established the restrictive gun policy and when men left Air America. Jim, a friend since Howard and I arrived in Udorn, had sold Howard Estes a .25 caliber automatic for our December RON at Sam Tong. During the course of conversation, he mentioned that he had a new .22 caliber Ruger Blackhawk for sale. Highly functional and considerably lighter than the 357, the seven-and-three-quarter-inch barrel came with interchangeable cylinders for both regular .22 caliber and longer .22 caliber hollow-point magnum bullets that tumbled when impacting flesh. Semi-obligated to Timmons, I told Jim I would think about it. Then Bill Cook provided a *Field and Stream* Magazine with an article about the Blackhawk that impressed me

even more concerning the gun's merits. It specified that the 2200-foot per second muzzle velocity weapon was extensively used by woodsmen in Canada and the U.S. to hunt moose.

To supplement reduced pay, others sought archaic, ethnic weapons to sell in the States. Howard began purchasing Thai ball and cap rifles from locals for about ten dollars to send home. I even bought one from him as a souvenir. Bill Cook, if one could believe him, indicated that he was purchasing Meo flintlock rifles upcountry to forward to gun collectors as conversation den pieces. He claimed each would sell at a highly profitable 100-150 dollars. Apparently, he knew law enforcement people where he lived, and sent the weapons to them for safekeeping.

THE MONSOON ENGINE

On the fourth, my initial Lao RON as a Captain coincided with the beginning of my first upcountry journey during the southwest monsoon season. A predictable annual event, the weather differed greatly from the hot, dry season. In addition to the monsoon, each year mountain flying presented other challenges in the form of smoky, cool, and windy periods.

As meteorologists theorized, throughout South and Southwest Asia, from mid-May through September, seasonal winds generated heavy rain over much of the area. Anxiously awaited by millions dependent on agriculture, the phenomenon revitalized the land and activated events that assured sustained life in tropical Asia. Additionally, the combination of rain and warmth worked together to produce one of the earth's most richly vegetated areas.

Thirteen million years before, during the volcanic Pliocene Era, some of the world's largest mountains were produced. Since then, the annual monsoon rains reduced the mountains by erosive action, returning soil to the flatlands to enhance man's crops.

Monsoon winds contributed to a process instrumental in producing an enormous perpetual heat machine and heat transfer mechanism. The annual cycle commenced when earth's tilt during summer months promoted maximum solar radiation and heat throughout the Asian continent. Cooler air cascading over the Indian Ocean, caused by temperature mixing in the water, then flowed toward the landmass to equalize air pressure. Heated air on land rose and was replaced by underlying warm, moist air from the sea. Upon reaching land, the oceanic air, heavily laden with water vapor from evaporating seawater, condensed, releasing latent energy. Feeding on itself, this energy heated surrounding air, forcing it upward and allowing additional moist air to infiltrate the area and continue the process. As precipitation cooled the land, the center of heat and convection moved inland where topography, Corollis effect, and low-level jet streams influenced the monsoon's track throughout Southeast Asia.

GOING TO SEE THE ELEPHANT ⁴

After deadheading to Sam Tong, Captain Dan "Red" Alston and I discovered both helicopters and crews absent, working somewhere in the field. Generally, crew changes were announced via the radio on the previous day. Therefore, when being relieved on station, a pilot would normally fly one fuel load consisting of three to four hours, then relinquish the ship to the arriving crew. This procedure worked fine for Alston when Wayne Knight returned in Hotel-13. However, Hotel-15's Captain failed to arrive at the base for a number of hours. Some greedy pilots, disregarding common courtesy, hungry to fly as much as possible, remained away from Sam Tong on their last day. Therefore, I was obligated to sit and wait.

⁴ Phrase stemming from the mid-1800s relating to wartime experiences. It also connotes excitement at an impending adventure.

On at least one occasion, this scheme backfired. Anticipating a crew change, certain Customer-favored individuals managed to schedule themselves to a remote area and did not return to Sam Tong until late in the day. Ed Reid was one of these persons. At one time, Billy Zeitler called Ed and said he was on the way to Sam Tong to relieve him. However, this was merely subterfuge to teach Ed a long overdue lesson. When Ed discovered the prank, he became very angry, indicating that he would never fly upcountry with Billy again. ⁵

HARMLESS PRANKS?

Because of pervasive boredom associated with upcountry work, some pilots felt the urge to employ humor in the form of childish pranks to torment others around them. Zeitler's mischief gradually became known to all, particularly unfortunate individuals who inevitably became victims of his designs. ⁶

Early one morning, Zeitler and Connor were scheduled to fly Vang Pao and his entourage on a multi-helicopter payroll mission to government (Meo) sites north of the Plain of Jars. As fuel was still a scarce and precious commodity, and rarely pre-staged at outlying sites, fuel management on such missions had to be carefully planned and monitored. After stopping at several sites, the two ships arrived at Houa Moung (VS-58) in upper Military Region Two and discovered the Helio assigned to deliver two drums had not arrived. Rather than wait, they continued south to Phu Cum (VS-50) on the last leg of Vang Pao's foray. By

⁵ Bill Zeitler Interview, 09/01/01.

⁶ Long after the fact, Bill indicated to the Author that "he never did anything to harm anyone and he eventually informed them what was occurring. If anything, they made more money at it." Usually to enhance the deed, many versions of his pranks were warped, but never to denigrate the person. The reader can be the judge.

this time, both ships were too critically low on fuel for a return trip to Long Tieng. The only solution was for the helicopter with the most fuel to fly the leader home. Remaining fuel would be transferred from one H-34 to the other for added safety, and full drums would be brought back to VS-50 ASAP.

Jack, cognizant of Billy's numerous tricks, lied, claiming that he had 400-pounds remaining when he actually only had 300 in the forward tank. Not to be denied, Zeitler (also called Z-man) convinced Connor that he also had 400-pounds when the gage only indicated 200. Fuel gage information was notoriously flawed, so as per their agreement, Stan Wilson transferred fuel to Zeitler's ship. As Bill departed, Jack assumed an I-have-been-had face.

It was still early when Bill dropped Vang Pao off beside the Long Tieng strip. Instead of returning immediately to Site-50 with fuel drums, he worked the local area until afternoon. By the time Zeitler carried fuel drums to Phu Cum, a concerned Connor was calling in the blind for help.

Jack failed to learn of Billy's chicanery for some time. When he did, he indicated that he would get even. However, Zeitler's logic was not without heart, for, believing that Jack should be compensated for ground time, throughout the day, he radioed "Operations Normal" as if they worked as a flight of two.

Bill Zeitler's antics continued into the following year, and even after he transferred to the fixed wing program.⁷

⁷ Mike Marshall Letters.
Bill Zeitler Interview, 09/01/01.

WHAM-BAM-THANK YOU MAM

It was mid-afternoon when I began flying Hotel-15 with Flight Mechanic "Pappy" Pascual. Following one short run, the loader directed me to Long Tieng. Vang Pao was already monitoring loading for a trip east when I arrived and taxied into the parking area beside the strip. A last-minute mission was planned to resupply the eastern section of Route-4 that mixed FAN and Meo government forces still occupied.

While "Pappy" attended to loading and stacking ammunition, "General Direction," Vang Pao's young cousin, climbed into the left seat of Hotel-13. Since we still lacked decent maps or experience in the area, and many new sites were being developed, a guide generally flew with us on at least an initial flight to familiarize and point the way around enemy hot spots. The generic term "General Direction" applied to any trooper assigned as a guide.

Despite clouds forming and rapidly ascending, we easily cleared Padong Ridge and cruised at relatively low level along the river valley. Then, paralleling high ridges, we turned northeast toward a wide gap between mountains well east of Xieng Khouang town and its formidable anti-aircraft guns. I had flown to Padong and Tha Lin Noi the previous year with Bob Hitchman, but now, with a low prevailing overcast, mountaintops shrouded in clouds, and after circumnavigating around weather, the area looked increasingly unfamiliar. At this point, I was happy to be following an "old timer," but the deteriorating conditions caused me some concern and prompted me to tighten up my position on Hotel-13.

We passed just to the east of a towering mountain, which I later learned was named Phou Kabo. Then, in the vicinity of Ban Phak Leung, a relatively low land village south of Route-42 that branched out of Xieng Khouang Ville, Alston called over the Fox



Vang Pao (center) conversing with his officers in the Long Tieng loading area prior to a mission. His personal bodyguard "Plug" dressed in black and with rifle slung stands to rear. Vang Pao's daughter to left of the group. Bill Cook in cockpit.

Marshall Collection.

Mike radio reporting that "General Direction" seemed confused as to our location, and that he thought this was the place we had been assigned to drop our supplies. About that time, Dan observed people running down a ridgeline toward a machine gun emplacement on the east side of Phou Kabo. The ground fire directed at our ships was loud enough for him to hear in the cockpit.⁸ Although not entirely positive, Dan thought something had hit the rotor head, but he experienced no overt control problem. I failed to see or hear anything, and was quite shocked when I observed Hotel-13 commencing a tight right turn, while Alston simultaneously announced, "*Break right! We are being fired on!*"

I was tucked in close behind Hotel-13 in trail formation, luckily not flying echelon right as we barely avoided a collision. While in a right 180-degree turn, I peered down and observed the giant right tire of my main gear flapping in the side slipstream and lying flat against the rim. I surmised that the bad guy duck hunters shooting at Alston had failed to properly lead him and hit us instead. After a quick internal inspection, Pascual reported that he could see no daylight from bullet holes in the cabin or tail cone sections. The lack of any visible damage seemed a moot point, for one could not observe critical components outside an airborne helicopter.

At any rate, with the mission aborted, we retraced the thirty miles back to Victor Site-20 Alternate (Site-98 was now

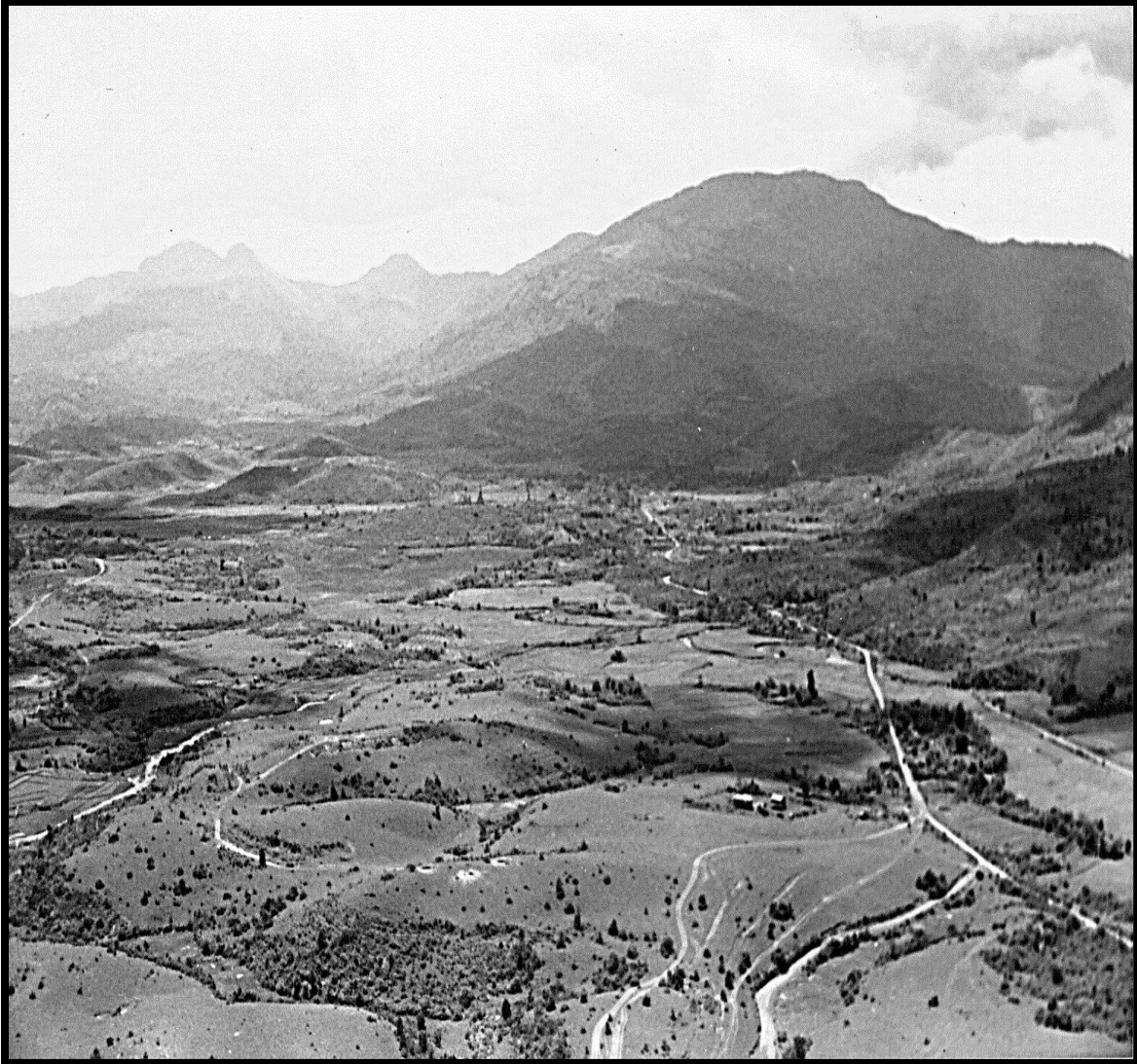
⁸ Regarding small arms ground fire at lower altitudes: It was generally heard rather than seen. If observed, the muzzle flash appeared like a yellow strobe with a puff of smoke during the day and white strobe at night. Tracers appeared as a red (NATO) or green (Soviet Bloc) streak.

Depending on individual perception, small arms fire could sound like a click, snap, pop, muffled dry stick snapping, a whip cracking, popcorn popping, or a muffled sharp engine backfire.

Mac Thompson, Email, 01/14/00.

logged as VS-20A). As I attempted to follow Dan, although the trip was relatively short, I was looking for forced landing spots should the situation dictate, and the flight seemed like an eternity. I was quite happy when we eventually cleared Padong Ridge and began a slow descent into Long Tieng. Alston was concerned that I would encounter ground resonance if I landed, so I hovered while "Pappy" discharged the load. Dan went on ahead to Sam Tong to arrange my reception. Terminating to a hover on the flattest terrain I could find, locals stacked rice bags from the warehouse high enough so I could touch the left wheel down first and then smoothly ease the right landing gear struts onto the bags. Maintaining a level attitude at all times, the process worked perfectly.

Once on firm ground, Alston vividly described the enemy machine gun hammering at us. Since I neither saw nor heard the brief action, this had little or no real impact on me. Additionally, the hit was no big deal and, except for a mild adrenalin rush, failed to bother me at the time or afterward, but I did find it perplexing to be placed out of commission on my initial visit upcountry working as a PIC. The incident tended to reiterate that the job did not only entail driving around delivering items and collecting project pay--there also were serious risks involved for the unwary. Certainly, the incident realistically exemplified that people out there did not like our presence and wanted to inflict maximum harm. Indeed, Abadie informed us more than once that project pay was a direct result of taking risks and hits. As I mulled the incident over in my mind, I was somewhat disturbed about not observing or hearing the weapon firing. I would have to be more careful and pay closer attention in the future. In addition, considering the on-the-job (OJT) incident a valuable learning experience, I concluded that I probably would have avoided the hit if not



A portion of the Xieng Khouang Valley looking east along Route-4 at Phou Kabo, the mountain where I received battle damage on my first flight upcountry as a Captain.

Author Collection.

flying in such close proximity to Hotel-13. ⁹

I considered my first hit with Tom Moher the previous year a Badge of Courage--an uplifting of peer status while joining the combat club. Of course, too much battle damage could be demoralizing. Now, with a second incident under my belt, I sincerely hoped I was not a "snake bitten" type, destined to be what others called a "Magnet Ass."

"Pappy" did not discover any additional battle damage. However, Dan's ship had incurred a severed rotor head damper line. Curiously, Dan hemmed and hawed, denying and claiming that it probably happened at another time. Curiously, he would not admit that he had been hit that day. ¹⁰

After completing inspections, satisfied that there was no additional damage, we called Sierra-08 on the high frequency radio net and requested parts. Then we went to the warehouse to check on accommodations for the night.

When Jane Alston heard the story, she informed her husband that because he "saved my ass," I owed him something. ^{11 12}

Sometime later, while dining with the Alstons and Elders at the Keynote Restaurant on Patpong Road, I did pay him back. A

⁹ Author Note: That was the last time I flew tight formation with another aircraft. This policy served me extremely well in the future.

¹⁰ The tendency of a minority of pilots to deny battle damage persisted over the years. However, all generally received their comeuppance. Most pilots were somewhat eager to claim battle damage. Not only did the experience enhance reflection and self-appraisal, talking about it also promoted a soul cleansing catharsis. Such incidents also helped to record exact enemy areas and frequencies of hostile activity to justify hazard pay.

¹¹ Dan Alston Interview, 09/22/99.

¹² Author Note: Actually, Jane Alston's assumption was erroneous, for "Red" never should have flown over the enemy that day.

popular spot with crews, the Keynote was noted for its steaks, salads, and live music. ¹³

During the course of the evening, the two couples collectively decided that I would pay the bills, partially defraying my blood debt to Alston and to Dianne Elder, who had lent me her Honda following the demise of my bike. However, my wallet suffered somewhat less when the waiter presented the bill to "Red" at the opposite end of the table. For when the overly boisterous and inebriated Alston observed the total sum, naturally assuming it was padded, he swore and tore it to shreds. The waiter did not know what to do about the redheaded ugly American or the lost check, so I paid what probably was less than the original bill, and, embarrassed, beat a hasty retreat from the establishment.

Pop departed for Vientiane on the last Helio, but Tom Ward, his second in command, was present that night. Lately a maximum of two helicopter crews RON at Sam Tong. Pilots flying faster Helios normally returned to Vientiane for the night. The operating budget and crew preferences had a lot to do with this arrangement as, under contract specifications, the Helio cost only a fraction to operate per hour compared with that of the H-34. Furthermore, the return of small planes to Vientiane was quick, and the autocratic Buell, taking a leaf from Agency honcho Bill Lair's book of minimizing American presence upcountry, tailored his operation to suit him. Mainly, he never intended his warehouse to provide accommodations for more than himself, one or two assistants, and occasional visitors. Of course, now with the advent of one or two H-34 crews RONing,

¹³ Author Note: Until discovering differently, beset with medical problems, employees erroneously believed the better eating establishments in Bangkok provided properly washed and safe-to-consume fresh vegetables. This theory proved to be untrue, as was revealed in 1964 when I was diagnosed with amoebas.

this pattern could be severely disrupted should aircraft or weather problems prevent rotating crews from returning south. Pop sometimes acted as if we imposed on him, but in all fairness, he did not receive much tangible support to accommodate flight crews. USAID was not in the same business as the CIA, and some conflicts arose at embassy level funding projects. ¹⁴

Tom Ward, a former University of Texas teacher at Austin, Texas, rejected a comfortable academic life for a more austere existence as Buell's IVS assistant in March. Pop, an uneducated farmer possessing no accounting talents, favored a hands-on approach to everything he attempted. Therefore, IVS tapped the more intellectual Ward as an administrator to maintain the books, order supplies, and forward reports. Tall and friendly, Tom was hospitable and liberal with helpful information.

Since no succulent rats were available to consume that evening, I assembled a mixed Beanie Weenie and scrounged rice supper provided from Pop's houseboy in the cook shack next to the sleeping-administration area. Wayne told me the houseboy entered the building one day with seven rats skewered on crossbow arrows that he shot in the rear of the warehouse. After roasting them on an open fire, the boy offered one to the Captain. He did not particularly like the idea of eating the rodent, but it tasted fine.

Knight was never sick upcountry, but believed he would have been had he partaken in the rice drinking ceremonies for dignitaries. During one of his first trips to Sam Tong, the pilots were under strong pressure to take their places in the wine sipping formality. Wayne was in the fifth position, next to

¹⁴ CJ Abadie Email, 02/06/99.



Tom Ward and a shirtless "Pop" Buell departing the H-34 parking-fueling area adjacent to the dirt runway at Sam Tong, Laos, for the supply warehouse. The lower portion of the distinctive forested karst stands in the left background.

Wayne Knight Collection.

the Nai Ban's wife, whose teeth were horribly blackened by chewing the astringent beetle nut. During his turn, he sipped only a small amount from the crock through the long bamboo tube. Jim Coble used another method to deceive his hosts. He sucked up a small amount and then spat it back down the tube. The pilots went to Pop afterward and insisted that no matter how offensive it might seem to the locals, they could not consume the nasty alcoholic beverage and return to flying duties. Wayne and Pop enjoyed a good relationship and had much in common, for both originated from Indiana farms. Therefore, stemming from this rapport, Pop spread the word among his people that helicopter pilots could not drink and fly, and by the time I went upcountry, we were generally exempted from this recreation.¹⁵

It was fortunate I never had to drink the fermented beverage, for after depleting the "good" rice wine, young girls poured additional water over the rice and husks. In later years, after an inspection trip to Sam Tong, an American doctor, after analysis, indicated the water poured into the crocks was highly contaminated and contained hepatitis germs.

Except for the more substantial exterior, the warehouse had changed little from the previous year and more recent RON's there. Since the advent of increased air supply requirements, much of the thatched roof building's original front bamboo siding had been replaced with flattened fifty-five-gallon fuel drums to better withstand the high winds during the monsoon season and to increase security. Little went to waste in the mountains and even drum lids were hammered into cooking vessels shaped like Thai woks.

¹⁵ EW Knight Emails, 06/08/00, 06/11/00.

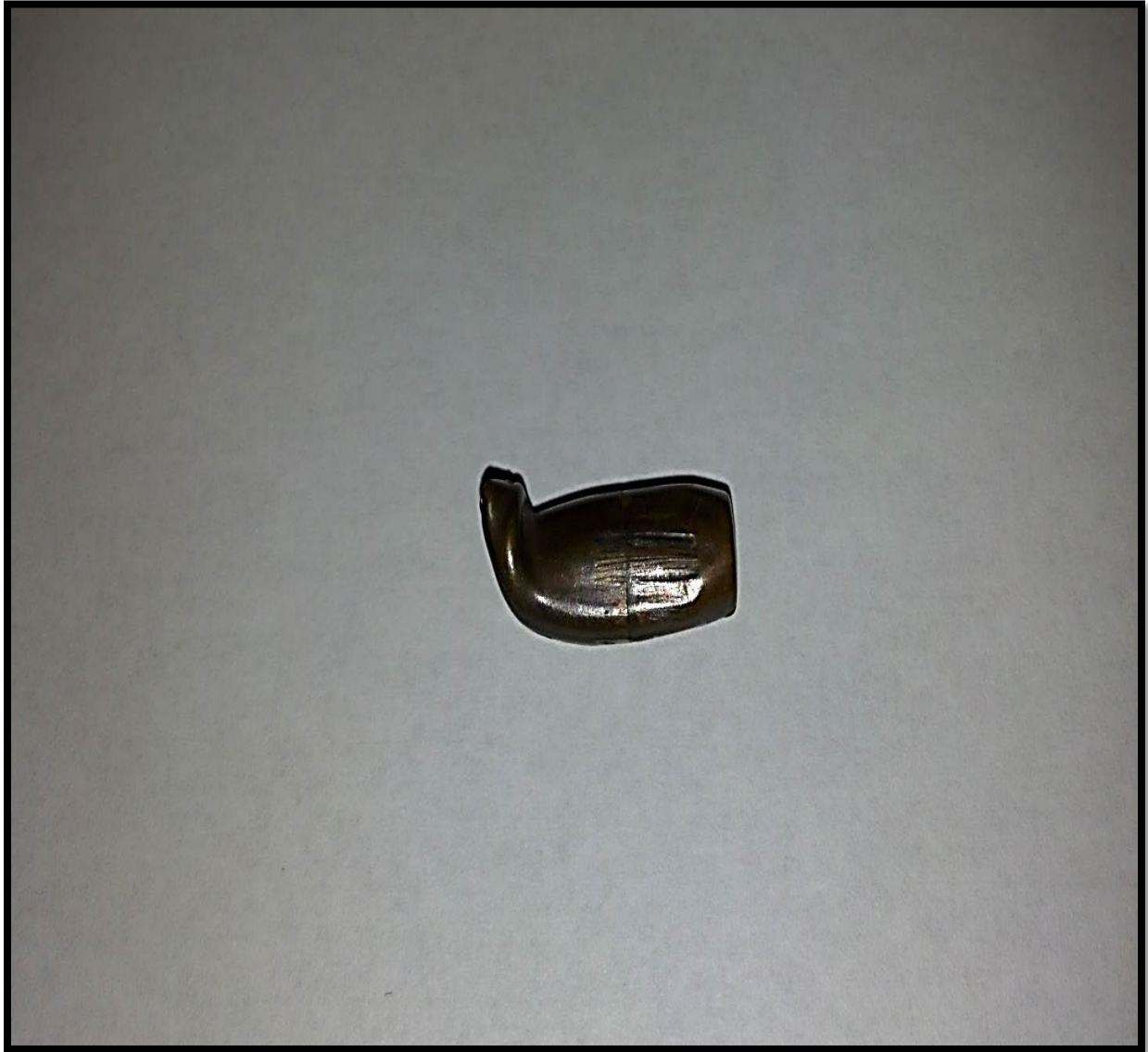
Inside the segmented dirt floor building, the smaller room was used as an office, communications center, conference room, and living quarters. Against the left wall, a single side band radio sat on olive-drab folding field desk left by the departing White Star team the previous October. The radio was used to relay and receive reports from Vientiane and the field toward evening before the generator was shut down about 2000 hours.

Recalling the cold nights spent there in December, not relishing another torture session on the raised bamboo pallet in the room's center, with Ward's blessing, Alston searched the large rear storeroom for an alternative. There, piled high with food commodities marked with the clasped hands on a shield logo were: sacked rice, butter, oil, powdered milk, and salt. Other AID consumables included hoes, shovels, machetes, buckets, bolts of black cloth, iron bars, and black plastic for temporary shelter. Medicinal supplies, many again left by White Star medics, were stacked on shelves. With the minimum of rummaging, "Red" found two cots and blankets, which we used to good advantage that night.

Despite heavy rain squalls continuously passing through the valley, the thick thatch roofing allowed a minimum or no water into the building. However, over time, the inner thatch surfaces dried and degraded, causing fine dust to fall on occupants. Therefore, workers lined the ceiling with discarded parachutes. Nylon chutes served a dual purpose, that of minimizing nocturnal rats from copulating or leaping onto one's cot. Therefore, it was prudent to position cots in suitable locations to avoid such an unpleasant encounter. Knight recalled being suddenly awakened in the middle of the night by the crack of a rifle. Because of the Plain of Jars proximity to Sam Tong, we were overly sensitive about gunshots or loud noises. But it was nothing. Only Pop, who had rigged a .22 caliber rifle with a flashlight,

and, without warning others, dispatched a rat scampering over the rafters.

The weather continued iffy on my 28th birthday, and the Udorn maintenance team did not arrive by Caribou until late morning. With Stan Wilson in charge, the team skillfully installed a new tire assembly. Before leaving for home, Stan presented me with a bent .30 caliber rifle bullet he retrieved from inside the damaged tire (I still have this souvenir in my Lao artifact collection). The copper-jacketed round looked exactly like one of ours; so much for USG foreign aid. Unfortunately, too often forces switched sides or evacuated positions, leaving supplies and weapons for the opposing forces to use against us. The irony stemmed from the fact that USG provided military supplies, and we delivered the means to ultimately shoot at us. This never changed and was something we were forced to cope with over the years. As it was too late in the day for any but local flying, my new Flight Mechanic Lacsina and I failed to burn even one fuel load.



The expended .30 caliber enemy bullet that struck and lodged inside the right tire of Hotel-15 at Phu Kabo.

Author Collection.

Toward evening Pop Buell and Thongsar Boupha returned to Sam Tong. As a multi-lingual Lao, field assistant Thongsar comprised the third leg of the competent IVS team. Over the next few days, and subsequent RON's, I continued to learn more about Xieng Khouang, the Meo, and Kong Le, a man Pop intensely disliked. Buell, an enigma then, always gave his personal view of events, and since I had insufficient knowledge to know differently, his strong biases easily became my biases. Within just a short time, as a new impressionable guy, I was really pumped up about my job and the capability of the Meo when I departed Sam Tong.

POP'S CONTRIBUTION

While the communist threat enveloped the Plain of Jars, Edgar Buell, a former Indiana farmer, worked as an International Volunteer Service agricultural advisor at Lat Houang. Evacuated just in time on 31 December 1960, he departed the eastern Plain for the safety of Bangkok. Toward the end of January, he returned to Vientiane to assist in organizing Meo refugee supplies. Then he journeyed to squatter camps located in the hills around the Plain to support resettlement projects. Agency Meo program manager, Bill Lair, after observing the raw-boned man's unconventional efforts, thought Buell performed an excellent service that complemented his Meo program. Thereafter, Bill helped support Pop, assuring him of a long and historical career in the mountains of Laos. Next, Lair arranged for Pop (named for his age and withered appearance) to be assigned refugee responsibilities in Vang Pao's stronghold south of the Plain of Jars, and provide assistance with aircraft delivery of supplies. During the course of his work and extensive travels,

through refugee reports, Buell fed a steady stream of valuable intelligence to CIA representatives concerning enemy movements and dispositions throughout the area.

During the spring of 1962, journalist Donald Schanche, on assignment with the *Saturday Evening Post*, traveled to Long Tieng with Buell. At this time, the valley supported a dozen hamlets containing 1,250 Meo and 350 Lao Theung, along with a new school and several buildings for military training. In June, editors of the *Post* published an article portraying Pop as the main principal in that portion of Laos. Considering his notoriety an opportune cover, the Agency encouraged Pop to take credit for the entire Meo program and behave as if it was his operation. Therefore, in July, when Americans were bailing out of the country, Buell was allowed to remain in Laos pursuing assistance and development projects under the auspices of USAID.

After Vang Pao moved the majority of his operation to Long Tieng, as a superior alternative to Pha Khao, Pop relocated north across the ridgeline to the Sam Thong valley. With one location mainly allocated for refugee work and the other site military training, the twin locations were born, functioning as complementary portions of the entire program. Sam Tong became a cover site and a refugee showplace to assuage world opinion of the conflict. Long Tieng, never displayed on a map by name, was the clandestine home and heart of the Meo resistance forces and the CIA advisors who sponsored the movement.

Pop eventually transferred from IVS to the USAID organization, becoming Xieng Khouang Province's primary refugee field chief in the center of the Meo operations area. Buell did not understand much Lao and decided he needed an interpreter to better interface with clan leaders. Therefore, he journeyed to Vientiane to visit an older USAID friend, hoping he had knowledge of a good English speaker who might fit into the

overall scheme of things. He was in luck, for his friend was helping teach advanced English to a stocky young man, Thongsar Boupha, then working part time for USAID.

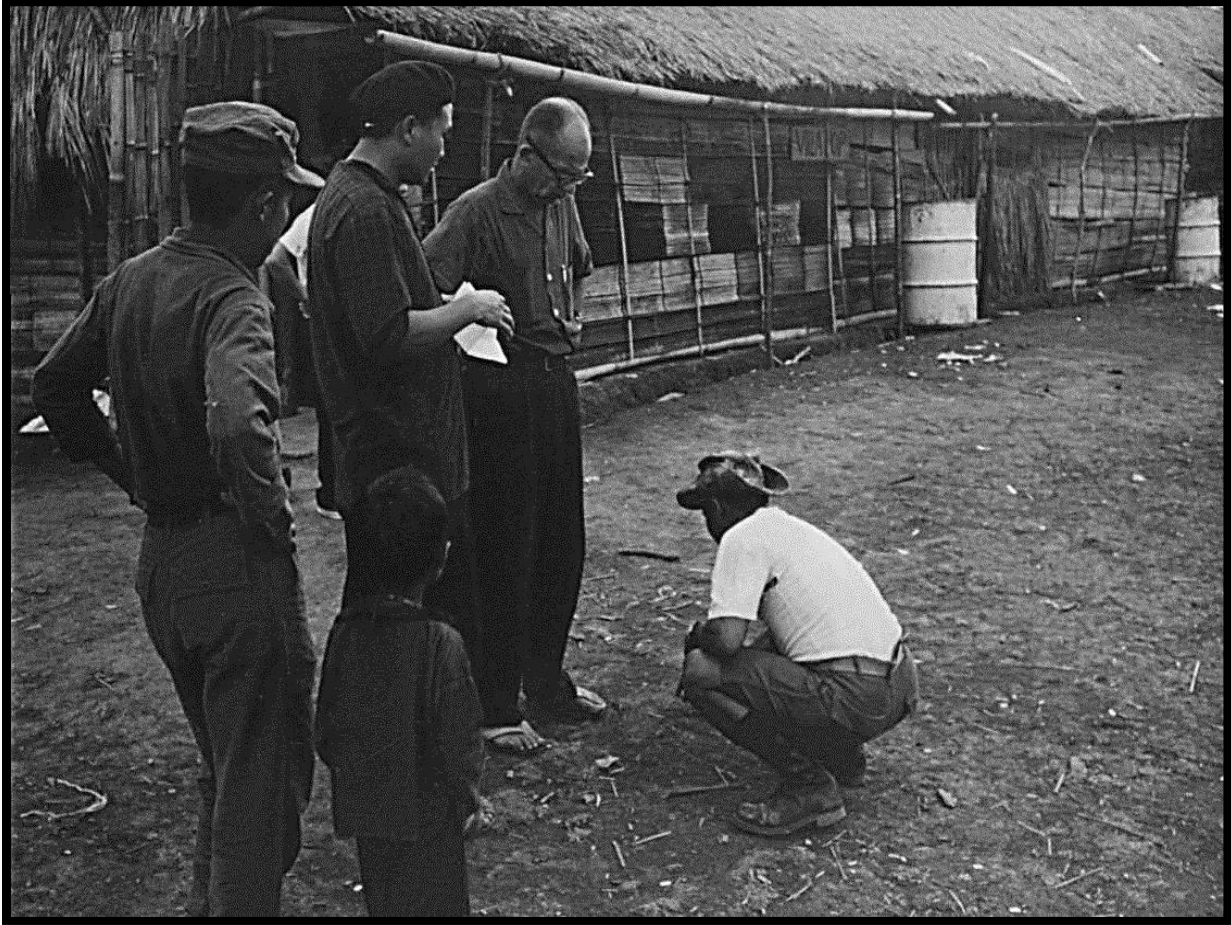
ADDITIONAL PRINCIPALS

Thongsar had previously been a Buddhist monk at a wat in the administration capital of Vientiane, and studied English at the USIS-sponsored Lao-American-Association. After two years, he opted for more worldly pursuits and left the monkhood. Pop's friend was so impressed with Thongsar that despite an English deficiency, he recommended him to Pop, thus beginning years of a close association.

Pop's civilian organization was a developing entity. Every Meo village contained a chief, called a Nai Ban. A Tasseng presided over groups of villes. The Nai Khong was an experienced representative appointed by Vang Pao. These leaders possessed great power, and blessing of both the Americans and Vang Pao. They became the eyes and ears of the program in the area. They made the final decisions, solved the problems, and spent a lot of time meeting with Vang Pao and the military. Moreover, they were not loath to reprimand an out-of-line military commanding officer. Vang Pao, who understood that the program would never work unless the civilian population and the families were contented, always backed the Nai Kongs' decisions.

When fully developed, Sam Tong supported four Nai Kongs, carefully chosen to represent each of the four major Meo family tribes. Vang Pao also married a number of young women to cement loyalty between tribes. It was an extremely important factor since family tribal politics and loyalties dominated the manner in which Meo society conducted business.

Even though Thongsar was youthful, he became an excellent



Thongsar Boupha (kneeling) while describing something to "Pop" Buell and Dacha in front of the USAID Sam Tong warehouse. Thongsar preferred to wear cowboy attire when working. Legendary Thai PARU Dacha, wearing black clothing and beret, was noted for his courage and initiative in combat. White fifty-five-gallon drums against the warehouse are positioned to catch precious rain water during the monsoon season.

Marshall Collection.

diplomat. A common ordinary ethnic Lao, he had no hang-ups about where tribal people came from, or what they thought or did differently from his culture. A plain guy, he represented and cared about the hill people and possessed a great deal of curiosity as to what people thought and how they performed. Mainly, he desired to be their friend.

Serving as Pop's confidant and interpreter, Thongsar acted as a de facto Nai Kong in dealing with the ethnic population. The assistant was especially valuable during meetings when Pop, who never actually spoke languages that well, gave the village leaders' hell about how he wanted the operation accomplished. Then Thongsar, assuming the status of a field diplomat, translated saying "Daddy Pop" was upset, but spinning the content, he always softened Pop's harsh spiel. As a result, village elders left the meeting satisfied and Pop, not really knowing what had transpired, was equally pleased.

After Thongsar became proficient and comfortable speaking the Meo language, Pop, recognizing his ability to communicate and a "talent at yarning," asked the young man to research Meo history, customs, and culture, and to record this information for IVS/AID personnel who might find it useful preparing for their work. Producing a story believed an accurate interpretation of Meo legend and history, Thongsar drew information from an elderly man living at Nam Chong (Site-17), a village located along the Nam Ngum, south of Xieng Dat and San Luang, just before the river turned toward the PDJ. Divided into three chapters, the colorful paper dealt with the beginning myth, departing the old land and moving to Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua, and customs relating to agriculture, religion, education, marriage, birth, health, and death.

Bill Taylor, an IVS veterinarian specializing in animal husbandry, was careful not to distort the contents as he edited

Thongsar's story. Bill normally worked out of Vientiane and the Luang Prabang area. He was good friends with Doctors Charles and Pat Weldon, and visited the more stable refugee areas while attempting to improve livestock populations and increase dietary protein. He made a few short trips to Sam Tong, but in his opinion there was not much he could do there, given the current situation. ¹

THE MEO

During future Sam Tong RONS and spates of bad weather when it was impossible to fly, there was adequate time to converse in detail about the prevailing situation in Xieng Khouang Province and learn about Meo history.

Many Meo people, intimidated by the more sophisticated and aggressive Chinese, departed Kweichow, Kwangsi and Yunnan provinces. Over the past century, because of war and other displacement, they continued moving south to more secure locations in Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. Estimates of total population ranged as high as two and a half million in the four countries.

For security, and because of difficulty acclimating to valley life and rice paddy cultivation, Meo clans preferred mountain living at the highest elevations possible. This isolation tended to preserve their cultural identity and mode of dress. Although harassed over the centuries by repression and disruption, they maintained a strong feeling of independence and fierce resistance to any oppressors, which stimulated distrust

¹ Letters from a USAID co-worker who, for personal reasons, wishes to remain anonymous.
Paul White, *Debrief of a Refugee Relief Officer Xieng Khouang Province, Laos* 1966, 4,6.
Thongsar Boupha, *The Story of the Meo People*, Bill Taylor ed. (Laos: U.S. AID-RDD, 1963).

between themselves and valley dwellers. They also demonstrated that no matter how difficult their problems as refugees, they were able to overcome them. With the basic unit of political structure centered on the household and village, the Meo displayed an initiative, adaptability, and an ability to organize. Utilizing a strong clan system, the chief was responsible for defense, trail maintenance, and, after soil depletion, organizing relocation to a new more fertile area. A district leader functioned as the conduit between villages and high government officials.

Except for some Christian converts, most Meo practiced an animistic type of religion. Like our American Indian culture, a village shaman communicated with spirits, dispersed evil "phi," and practiced medicine.

Largely an agricultural society, tribes relied on shifting, or very wasteful slash and burn cultivation. After determining suitability of the soil for their crops by the time-honored method of tasting, in February, men clear-cut a mountainside forest area and burned vegetation. Depending on the concentration of population, this produced copious smoke and haze throughout the area, perpetrating an annual hazard to aviation. Then, before annual rains began, women tilled the soil and planted rice seeds. The mature crop was harvested during the November dry season. Maize, an important dietary staple for the people, also provided adequate space between rows for the cash and barter mechanism: opium from poppies. Opium was traded in market places for consumer commodities: cloth, sugar, sweetened canned milk, flashlight batteries, and the like. Other agricultural foods grown during the year included healthful cabbage, green beans, squash, cucumbers, turnips, sweet potatoes, and eggplant.

In addition to crops, the people raised cattle, pigs, horses, and water buffalo. Anyone who observed a beautiful white Meo dog, resembling an Alaskan Husky, marveled at its beauty, and some pilots took pups to Udorn for wives or girlfriends.

Generally, every Meo village had a blacksmith. These men excelled in creating agricultural implements, axes, knives, and flintlock rifles. Gunpowder was laboriously prepared from charcoal and saltpeter.²

During a twenty-year period, because of fighting and dislocations during World War Two, the first Indochina War, and the present PL/NVA conflict, life styles drastically changed for the Meo, and many of their traditional economic pursuits were no longer feasible.

Consisting of a particularly hardy people with strong ethnic clan and tribal bonds, the resilient Meo possessed and developed sufficient survival techniques to ensure them majority tribal status throughout North Vietnam and Laos. Many participated in the first Indochina War as scouts and fighters on both sides. At least one author believed Meo in the North Vietnam area were instrumental in the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu. However, the communist victory failed to end Viet Minh activity among mountain minorities, and continued with the Tai-speaking population in the border areas of northern Laos.

Hanoi's Lao operations marked an extension of the 1953-54 Viet Minh invasions. Following the 1954 signing of the Geneva Accords, it became risky for the communists to invade upper Laos again. Therefore, they covertly embarked on subversive political and paramilitary activities among minorities living in northern Laos. These activities surfaced during the middle of 1959 after

² Native gunpowder: Bat dung found in caves contained a high concentration of nitrates and was used to good advantage in manufacturing gunpowder.

captured Black Tai reported that communists had invaded the northern provinces of Phong Saly and Sam Neua, which contained large concentrations of White and Black Tai who lived on both sides of the porous border. Consequently, the Lao communist movement was not predicated on enlisting Lao lowlanders, but Tai, Meo, and Lao Theung (Kha minorities).

Meo geographic positions on mountains overlooking major lines of communication, and their military organization talents made the tribals choice candidates for western strategic planning. Accustomed to living on and controlling high terrain, guerrilla units were well adapted for interdiction techniques using hit-and-run raids on roads and passes vital to the enemy supply routes to the Plain of Jars.

Many tribals already possessed this experience. During the first Indochina War, French commandos used tribal marquis in the role of scouts and fighters. Not all Meo were friendly to western interests, however. Because of Meo geographic locations along border areas, long-standing bitter tribal feuding between family clans, or promises made by Hanoi leaders relating to autonomy in western sections of North Vietnam, large numbers of Meo were recruited into North Vietnamese or Pathet Lao movements. Other Meo sympathetic to the Pathet Lao cause, or those desiring to remain neutral and left to their own pursuits, largely ignored the war until Vang Pao or communist troops forced them to participate.

Over the years, a large group of White Meo ³ rallied around their prominent leader and RLG minister, Touby Lyfong (referred to by Westerners as the King of the Meo) on the high ground surrounding the Plain of Jars. Therefore, under Touby's guidance

³ Meo clans were identified according to the various colored sashes worn around their waists.

and political influence, the Meo of Xieng Khouang province enjoyed a modicum of discourse with the RLG. ⁴

The tough Meo did not fight to support ideological dogma, but because the communists attempted to restrict their independence and deprive them of benefits derived from their cash opium crop. Strong leaders, like Vang Pao, weighed heavily in their quest for a new world. Pop Buell also became a major inspiration and an enduring legend within the Meo culture. Since 1960, the sincere love and devotion that Buell displayed to the people in Xieng Khouang ensured continuing loyalty to the U.S. As a revered father figure and perceived God-like qualities, "Tan Pop" far exceeded others' attempts to successfully organize the Meo into a cohesive people. One of his favorite subjects was the Meo. Hearing Pop talk about "**my people**" tended to influence visitors into believing that he alone was responsible for the program's success. However, during my first few RONS at Sam Tong, a more autocratic Pop surfaced. I did not know much about the big picture in Laos or the CIA's broad function at the time, but suspected that the folks across the ridgeline in the Long Tieng Valley must have possessed enormous influence and held equal, if not greater sway over the people. More would be revealed to me in due time. This was particularly evident when the conflict broadened and my tasks evolved. Then the entire spectrum relating to the war in Military Region Two slowly unfolded.

At first, developing the Sam Tong complex was a slow process, with a large portion still left to accomplish. Helped

⁴ Peter Kunstadter, *SEA Tribes, Minorities and Nations* (Princeton University: 1967).
IVS representative Tom Ward.
Barney, 271-93.
McAllister, 820-23.

by Thongsar, Tom Ward, USAID funds, and CIA air support, Pop was instrumental in the process of creating a nerve center for refugee relief, medical help, and education, which persisted for years.

Looking at a Meo, particularly the women, a Westerner would not be impressed. Most were singularly unattractive. From the beginning of our involvement in Military Region Two, Pop cautioned that the warlord, Vang Pao, would not allow fraternization between flight crews and Meo women. Already cognizant of the colonel's swift and harsh justice, we heeded the warning. At any rate, what I had observed of the women's appearance thus far stymied any desire on my part to pursue any kind of relationship. For one thing, the people were reputed not to fully bathe or change clothes for an entire year lest they anger the water spirits. I suppose water scarcity during the dry season also contributed something to do with the taboo.

While celebrating the February New Year they at least partially bathed and donned a complete set of new clothes. Over the past couple of years, hoping to eradicate simple skin diseases, Pop provided soap and encouraged more frequent bathing. Thus far, during a relatively short period, there was some tangible evidence of success. Although they appeared dirty externally, Pop claimed that the people were clean internally, as they meticulously cleaned their food and dined off tables using plates and utensils. If true, they had a leg up on Thai and Lao folks I observed sitting on woven floor bamboo mats, picking at their glutinous rice and weeds with unwashed fingers.

Meo women dressed in traditional black garb, with a turban coiled around the head and a colored cloth waist sash. The waist adornment identified their tribal identification, usually white in Xieng Khouang Province. If wealthy, they wore their fortune around the neck in the form of a yoke like necklace of beaten

and worked silver, the accepted monetary exchange in the province. The number of silver piasters dangling from the ornament portrayed additional upper-class status. Some of the older ladies displayed large, ugly goiters protruding laterally from their necks, a sure sign of dietary iodine deficiency from a lack of fish products available at higher elevations. One look at their filthy unshorn feet was enough to turn one's stomach. Thick calluses attested to daily treks to the rice, corn, and opium fields. Performing the heavy work, leaving the hunting and gathering to the men, the women conducted all hillside agricultural tasks. Some fields were so steep it was impossible to visualize cultivating them and it gave rise to Ed Reid's humorous quip that *"The people had one leg shorter than the other."*

There was a noticeable shortage of young men and boys at Sam Tong, as most were engaged in war activities. Occasionally an emaciated "old man" hobbled about, looking much like a Chinese rosewood woodcarving that I had purchased in Hong Kong. One day I observed a dirty child with blond hair, blue eyes, and European features, which caused me to speculate if there had been a randy French soldier in the woodpile.

Pop informed me that until the war displaced many individuals, the Meo rarely married outsiders and generally maintained a homogenous race. However, since increased contact with Lao Theung living at lower elevations and other ethnic populations, there was a beginning of racial admixture. In the past, however, Meo villages were spaced miles apart, resulting in a restricted gene pool, occasional inbreeding, and evidence

of albinism. Additionally, custom dictated that if a husband died, the man's brother inherited the wife. ⁵

In contrast to unfortunates with leprosy, children displaying a congenital lack of normal pigmentation were seldom rejected by the society. I saw more than one young human curiosity, displaying translucent skin, white hair, pink iris' and red pupils. I was told they exuded a disagreeable odor, but never having performed a sniff test, could not corroborate the statement. I never saw older albinos.

Pop was an inveterate poker player and a self-professed expert at the game. After mustering his favorite pilots, many times directly following supper, the entertainment commenced on an old army blanket. Relative to participants' money, at times players gambled for a small amount, other times just beans. As a nonparticipant, I received the distinct impression that if you were not one of Pop's poker buddies, he ignored you. Aware of this bias, always an unlucky gambler, I still refused to play. Therefore, considered an outsider, I generally watched, kept my mouth shut, and listened to the idle banter and the rough Midwestern dialect used by the balding Hoosier. Despite the taciturn temperament he normally tried to present, he was also quite funny in a homespun, rustic way, much like our own "Uncle Milty" Olsen, a pilot formerly in the ill-fated Beaver program, but now flying Helio Couriers.

Pop was known as a supreme leveler of people, not at all impressed with our higher educational levels or the money we earned. In fact, one had to be careful talking about pay around IVS employees who only received fifty dollars per week.

⁵ This was also the case in early rural American farm communities.

Right from the beginning, the crusty old IVS fellow made it clear to crews that while in **his** house we would live no better than **his** Meo. Allowing no creature comforts, he strictly regulated his program and tailored his (our) living style so as not to spoil the local people, as he insisted always occurred in other countries whenever Americans entered the picture. Sounding much like what Bill Lair might create for his Meo program, the philosophy seemed logical. However, unlike ordinary mortals, it was also equally important that flight crews obtain sufficient rest and adequate food following a long day spent in the cockpit. Neither was available to us at Sam Tong. Therefore, with little recourse, enduring the unhealthy and restless environment became our plight.

Depending on the length of a projected RON, we were required to haul enough clothes, food, and water to last the entire period. That seemed like a lot to carry, but I managed to stuff my inexpensive cardboard suitcase with distinctive gray uniforms, underwear, socks, canned goods, and other items perceived to last an upcountry trip. Out of necessity, I learned to economize on clothes by changing a shirt and underwear daily, but wearing trousers more than once. Since the temperature was generally not cold during the day, a gray Ike jacket and my late cousin Bruce Anderson's olive drab U.S. Army sweat shirt sufficed for damp conditions. As policy and part of the Air America uniform, we were required to carry a bulky jungle bush hat. Originally an Australian innovation, it was adopted from Special Forces White Star personnel long ago. Since there was little utilization of the hat, the unnecessary item generally sat disused in the cargo compartment.

Supplementing canned meat products, I carried a loaf of bread and a jar of the old standby, Skippy peanut butter. Providing little help during an emergency, my weapon was

secreted between layers of clothing. Since clean water was critical upcountry, Howard and others led the way purchasing red plastic five-gallon water cans at a downtown shop. We filled the jerry can type containers from our safe water point in front of the wooden administration building to ensure adequate drinking and teeth brushing requirements. Although the warm water turned stale after a couple days, tasting flat and distinctly plastic, it was supposedly uncontaminated and provided the only safe drinking water for crews. Besides seasonal rainwater, the only other water source available at Site-20 was from a downhill stream over a mile away below the lower portion of the air strip. Pop's houseboy trudged there and back daily to obtain a bucketful to brew coffee and cook rice.

I recalled Tom Moher's story about being trapped in the Pha Khao bowl for several days because of adverse weather and barely surviving on his RON goodies. Therefore, because of unfavorable weather or maintenance problems, we never knew where we might spend the night, so I always carried all my gear along on flights. More than one pilot lost his possessions when disembarking passengers "inadvertently" carried everything off the helicopter. Therefore, it became incumbent for the Flight Mechanic to carefully monitor the Captain's goods. Against this end, he usually stored the RON bag close to him under a bucket seat.

"Old timers" wisely advised us "newbies" that during an emergency, one normally exited the cockpit with only items attached to their body. With this information in mind, our lower trouser legs were configured with side zippered pockets designed to hold personal survival items. In addition to a pair of standard Navy issue plastic survival packets I obtained while squadron flight equipment officer, I carried a 6/12 insect repellent stick purchased at the STARCOM post exchange, a

watertight metal kitchen match container with paraffin-covered matches, and my multi-purpose Boy Scout pocketknife. My bootlaces consisted of nylon parachute cord, containing many unbreakable strands that could be knotted together and used for varied survival tasks. Some pilots had tailors sew large knife sheaths on the side of their trousers, but I rejected this as just another item that could easily catch on something in the cockpit and possibly restrict movement in an emergency.

OPERATIONS

Tom Moher advised me to fly all I could during periods of bad weather. This sage advice provided an excellent opportunity to learn local river systems and prominent landmarks at leisurely, low-level flight, something that would greatly aid my navigation in better weather conditions.

A major tributary of the Mekong River, the Nam Ngum flowed from hills northwest of the Plain of Jars westerly along Houei Ki Nin and San Louang (Sites-38 and 41) toward Xieng Dat (Site-26) where it doglegged south, passing Nam Chong (Site-17), and the fringes of Sam Tong and Long Tieng on its lengthy trek south toward the mother river. Over eons of weathering and erosion, the river sliced through deep ravines that even at the narrowest point were wide enough to allow low-level helicopter passage during periods of lowering cloud layers. Late in the day, using this method to return to base, I often low leveled back from western sites and never failed to safely reach Sam Tong.

Because many sites were located close to the river in non-hostile areas, if one could exit one of the gaps, or what we called "backdoors," at the fringe of the Sam Tong bowl, then seed rice and other supply missions could be conducted to some of the refugee sites.

Using this philosophy, highly motivated, and with a little cajoling of a doubting Customer, over the next three wet days, I managed a few of these flights, and convinced Tom Ward and Pop Buell of its viability. As soon as the cloud layer in the bowl lifted sufficiently and I could see daylight through a gap, I launched with a load for Meo sites. Of course, I employed discretion and they were generally never more than fifteen to twenty miles from the base. Clearing a gap, I would quickly descend toward the river and proceed on the mission. If a primary site was clobbered with low clouds and generally inaccessible, I always had an alternate landing zone in mind. This method proved no problem, for seed rice could generally be distributed to any village. I had good success with this technique and discovered that a site like Moung Phun (Victor Site-37), located at 3,600 feet south of Sam Tong, was often open for business when thick clouds hung on the tops of higher surrounding mountains.

When weather permitted, other flights took me north and northeast across two ridgelines to Ban Na and Tha Tham Bleung (Sites-15 and 72). Located close to the southern Plain of Jars, Ban Na was the site for an Air America radio station. Known as Delta for reporting purposes, the radio operator relayed pilots' hourly "operations normal" messages to Vientiane or Udorn. Flying low level and attempting transmissions over antiquated radios, establishing VHF contact with the station often proved frustrating or impossible. A hand slap from the CPH awaited an individual should he fail to communicate on time. Therefore, I sometimes climbed to altitude to achieve line of sight for radio contact. However, this method took extra time and was often impractical because of area wide cloud cover. As an alternative source of communications, we attempted to use the high frequency radio. With under-belly antennae loaded for ground transmission,



Moung Phun (LS-37), a representative upslope STOL refugee strip located on the heights above the Nam Ngum. Under monsoon laden skies, the upper left of the photo shows checkpoint "Peter," a fixed wing aircraft identification point for commencing an approach into Long Tieng.

Author Collection.

the ineffective device was never designed to use in the air. Despite static, occasionally atmospheric conditions would allow contact with Delta. Should all other contact attempts fail, we reverted to calling an overhead plane and requesting a relay. Despite the often-frustrating experience, the flight watch system, designed to protect the crews, generally worked, but we would have to wait years for improved and smooth communication.

Sharing flight time between agencies was common, and Sam Tong shuttles were interspersed with trips from Long Tieng. Despite some trips to Pha Khao, at first, I got the impression that Tony Poe and Vint Lawrence preferred to use experienced and knowledgeable "old timers," while I continued to cut my teeth on USAID work. Tony, paranoid about secrecy, believed that one could not talk about that to which one had not been exposed. Therefore, he preferred to use American Flight Mechanics and individuals he knew well, rather than third country nationals. However, I found that Long Tieng work assumed the highest priority, and at any time I could be yanked off a USAID-scheduled mission and reassigned to that base.

After work during the wet season, we attempted to park close to the warehouse and minimize walking through a slippery mass of red mud that was impossible to avoid. Just proceeding a short distance would cause two to three inches of slimy goop to collect and stick on the bottom of one's boots. This seriously impeded progress and made us look like staggering Frankenstein monsters. The process made me wonder how anyone, friend or foe, could walk any distance under such conditions.

One upside to the rain was abundant water available for washing. White fifty-five-gallon drums with the tops removed were staged along the front and corners of the warehouse to catch runoff from the thatched roof. Holding a small pan, we judiciously used precious liquid for bathing our upper body:

hands, face, pits, arms, and occasionally the chest. It was not an enjoyable experience, for the barrels always contained a smelly fuel residue. Over time, the containers rusted causing the water to take on a reddish hue and foul odor. Still, it was all the liquid we had available, and after a few days of heavy sweating, I was ready to bathe and shave, particularly before rotating to Udorn. The lack of bathing and attention to proper hygiene was always a sore subject with me. I could understand Buell's Spartan attitude about living no better than **his** natives, but it seemed unconscionable having to smell like them.

Before I began flying on 7 June, Viri Black arrived on a Caribou. Viri, who shared management duties with Jim Coble in the unpaid untitled role of Assistant Chief Pilot, assisted with pilot training. He flew with me the entire morning (Coble, who rarely flew upcountry, was officially advanced to CPH in May). Although I was beginning to enjoy flying and navigating by myself, I realized that these six-month upcountry route checks were a required part of Company training. Besides, I had just incurred battle damage on my first flight, and management's logical response was to assess my mental attitude in addition to my mountain proficiency. Management individuals also journeyed upcountry to converse with Customers on both sides of the mountain ridges regarding pilot performance, cooperation, and to help smooth over any real or perceived problems. Everyone liked the friendly, easy going Black, and I felt especially comfortable talking to him about the miserable living conditions we had to endure at Sam Tong.

On one passenger trip to Pha Khao with Viri, I recalled what Bill Zeitler had told me concerning Vang Pao's ruthless control over his people and treatment of a rare prisoner at the site. In the absence of an established prison, a deep hole was dug to temporarily house an occasional captive or political

detainee. Without benefit of food or sunlight, and breathing bad air, most incarcerated souls survived only a few days. After the move to Long Tieng, a similar hole was dug near a large karst, but rarely used, as few PL were ever taken alive.

Early during his check out period, Billy Zeitler worked mostly out of Sam Tong with Scratch Kanach. During his first landing at Pha Khao, Scratch told Billy to remain with the aircraft while he talked to the Customer about the area situation. Before he left, Zeitler saw three people walking together and asked about them. Scratch referred to the highest-ranking one as "that guy" being in charge of all the people in the area. "That guy" happened to be Vang Pao, but Bill did not know the meaning of VP at this time and thought the term might be an acronym for very important person. Interested, Bill continued to watch the trio. While conversing, Vang Pao casually drew his .38 caliber pistol and shot one of the men between the eyes. Shocked, Bill reasoned it must have been a political killing.⁶

Toward late morning, Hotel-14 arrived as a replacement for my aircraft. Hotel-15 had been in the field about three weeks and was due for a hundred-hour maintenance inspection. While Viril ferried Hotel-15 to Udorn, with weather improved considerably throughout the area, Flight Mechanic John Timmons and I knocked out six hours dipping and diving into local sites. Before securing the helicopter that evening, I was proud to report ten plus ten flight hours for the day over the high frequency radio. Ten hours per day in the air was the goal for every pilot, and I had achieved it during marginal weather conditions. I slept well that night.

⁶ Bill Zeitler Interview, 09/01/01.

Following Hitchman's regimen and tutoring the previous December, since loaders did not arrive until after 0700 hours, I arranged to have the aircraft preloaded the previous evening for a pre-approved mission. Then I arose early, hoping to launch and take advantage of any early bowl clearing. I generally used this routine for some time. Skipping breakfast, except for a can of orange juice, about 0900 hours I had the Flight Mechanic rummage through my luggage and pass a can of Beanie Weenies or Vienna sausage to the cockpit. If lacking a pop-top, I opened the can with my trusty P-38.⁷ Although greasy or gelatinous, the barely palatable cold mess tended to stave off hunger and provided some needed energy.

I knocked out seven plus five hours and logged thirty-five minutes "actual" instruments (another Hitchmanism) before a relief pilot arrived to take command of Hotel-14. As a switch from the fourth, this time, with Red Alston logging time in the left seat, I ferried Hotel-13 to Udorn for maintenance. Another good day happily pushed me to twenty-eight and a half hours for the five-day RON and the month. Even though it had been tough working in some of the worst weather I ever experienced, I learned valuable lessons about what I could do and what I could not do and still safely perform the job. Hazards abounded in the mountains, and penetrating clouds for a few seconds, or spinning down through a narrow hole, was a calculated risk, generally to be avoided except during extreme circumstances. Until other factors interceded, my increasing confidence level would sustain me for some time.

⁷ P-38: A compact and efficient aluminum fold out military can opener.

By 1 June, while Souvanna Phouma attempted to increase diplomatic pressure on the Pathet Lao to cease their military activity, the Lao coalition government was in shambles. ¹ The communists had assembled a rival government under their protection, and they had openly forced the Neutralists from most of their choice Plain of Jars positions. A de facto partition was seemingly complete and Vietnamese troops dominated all border areas of eastern Laos.

The situation was equally dismal in South Vietnam. The war had reached a stalemate and the heralded Strategic Hamlet program was in complete disarray. Additionally, the government had no clue on how to cope with the thorny Buddhist problem.

Until the South Vietnamese issue was settled, no real progress could be made toward a true Lao Neutralist government. However, despite possessing the capability of overrunning the country within weeks, the communists opted to wait and maintain some legal representation in Vientiane. ²

USG's indirect support of Kong Le on the Plain of Jars using RLG aircraft continued. ³ This was believed adequate to sustain FAN defenses, providing enemy military forces did not escalate activity. However, there was concern about the

¹ CIA Bulletin, Daily Brief, Laos, 06/03/63. "On 1 June Souvanna publicly charged that 'foreign troops'-the North Vietnamese-were spearheading the current attacks, and the next day he called on the Pathet Lao to halt their shelling of the neutralist positions on the Plaine des Jarres."

² Norman Hannah, 47, 67, 69.
Philip Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History 1948-1975* (New York: Oxford University, 1988) 302.

³ Air America leased or transferred several planes to the Lao government and used Company pilots to fly the missions. Maintenance was also performed by Company employees.

direction of future actions should the Pathet Lao suddenly eject Kong Le's forces from their few remaining positions.

By the end of the first week in June, Washington planners noted a further deteriorating military situation, with Pathet Lao and Viet Minh forces on the southern Plain of Jars appearing ready to turn the Neutralist flank at Moung Phanh. Speculation centered on a possibility that the communists might attempt to sever the PDJ on a line from the North Vietnam border to Luang Prabang.

Other than the Joint Chiefs of Staff version of Southeast Asia Treaty Organization Plan-5, there were no firm contingency plans to implement should the enemy increase pressure on the Neutralists. However, there was talk about employing recently transferred T-28s to the RLAF from Thai stocks, being moved into Laos and utilized judiciously against the Pathet Lao should Ambassador Unger and Washington concur.

Throughout the early months of 1963, to solidify hold on logistical pathways to South Vietnam, the enemy had expanded its control of the eastern sector of the central and southern Panhandle region in Military Region Three. Heralding future supply missions, in May they completed construction of two airstrips near the border south of Tchepone. In Military Region Four they were busy repairing an old French airfield near Chavane and were building a new one around Saravane. At the time of the report, disturbing information arrived from Military Region Three where Pathet Lao threats alone caused Neutralist units, previously ejected from Tchepone in April, to withdraw from Moung Phine and Mahaxay.

Among several courses of action considered to discourage further Pathet Lao movement was another SEATO battle maneuver operation in Thailand. A significant troop build-up had been employed the previous year to excellent advantage during the Nam

Tha Lao crises to persuade communist leaders to stand down.⁴ After the flap, Thailand and SEATO member governments jointly agreed to implement additional measures required to accommodate future circumstances and developments. Part of this plan included storage of great amounts of rolling stock and supplies in the country to provide requirements for rapid deployment. In addition, many non-combat personnel already were present in Thailand improving military infrastructure and communications.

Under the auspices of SLAT (U.S. Navy Seabee battalions), the U.S government continued to assist Thailand in efforts to improve logistical facilities and airfields. The United Kingdom provided medium range aircraft at Leong Nok Tha airfield in Ubon province. Australian and New Zealanders contributed men for the construction of the transport airfield and province roads to strengthen Thailand's logistical support.

The air-ground military exercise, "DHANARAJATA", scheduled to begin on 11 June and last through the 19th, was planned to involve 24,000 men from Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, Philippines, USA, U.K., and Thailand. The units would include two U.S. Army battle groups. However, because of the current Lao situation, after due deliberation, Air Chief Marshall Dawee Chunlasap reluctantly agreed to allow troops to enter the country early and remain for three weeks following the exercise if there was little publicity attached to the extension. The reluctance stemmed from past Thai sensitivity to having foreign military within the country, and the effect it might have on its neighbors.

With the arrival of U.S. Army advanced combat units from Hawaii to Korat Royal Thai Air Force Base about mid-May, first movements of SEATO personnel commenced two weeks early. Major

⁴ As a squadron member of HMM-261, the Author took part in this operation.

units were in place by the target date. U.S. forces, totaling 5,000, included an Infantry Battle Group, an Airborne Battle Group, one Tactical Fighter Squadron, a Reconnaissance Squadron, and supporting logistic elements. This particular year, planners structured military war games to assure that operations of multi-national forces in times of emergency would achieve maximum effectiveness in countering a sizeable enemy incursion across the Mekong River. Some emphasis was to be placed on training Thailand's large standing army in modern counterinsurgency techniques to deal with communist inroads in the northeast. At the operation's conclusion, 1,700 troops, including the Infantry Battle Group with artillery and engineer units, remained in the country for an additional three weeks as a show of force. During that period, they participated in three reconnaissance marches toward the Lao border without incident. ⁵

⁵ Edward Keefer and Glenn LaFantasie eds., *Lao Crises*. Memorandum from Michael V. Forrestal of the National Security Council Staff to President Kennedy # 474, 475, 4 Jun., 7 Jun, 1963. Jacob Van Staaveren, *The USAF in SEA: Interdiction in Southern Laos 1960-68* (Washington D.C.: AF History, 1995) 15. Official Thai Yearbook 1968. Asia (1963) Back in Time-World Book Online Americas Edition, 3. FRUS. *Time Magazine, In the Vaccination Stage*, 05/24/63, Internet.

A letter was waiting for me from headquarters Marine Corps containing information relating to my selection for promotion to reserve Captain. A few prerequisites were stipulated in the official correspondence. Doctor Kao fulfilled my request for the physical, but I had to defer the requirement for a uniformed picture. Instead, I forwarded the paperwork to the personnel section in Taipei requesting a copy of a service-connected photo from my file. The paperwork and request lay in some disinterested person's in box for a month.

DOCTOR MA

Doctor Kao departed for Taiwan on home leave and was replaced by Doctor Ma.¹ Ma, representing a younger generation, had more formal education, trusted modern drugs, and spoke considerably better English than Kao. However, trying to maintain a professional demeanor, the modern medical man lacked Kao's folksy, back-woods touch and most employees realized that Kao possessed the larger heart. Ma did provide medical advice, conducting informative lectures pertaining to maintenance of good health. He delineated some of the major endemic diseases in Thailand, and in layman terms suggested reasonable ways to avoid them.

After Ma had been in Udorn for a time, Ben Moore recommended to Wayne Knight that they have some fun with the serious doctor. There had been an accident in the Luang Prabang area involving an employee, and Moore was organizing a team to investigate. Protocol recommended that a doctor form part of the

¹ Humor prevailed, and we referred to Ma as "Doctor Dog" after the Thai word for the animal.

team; however, at the time, Company policy relating to Taiwanese nationals forbade travel to Lao's northern regions.

Fully aware of this policy, the Base Manager summoned Doctor Ma to his office to inform him of the accident. Moore then asked if he would volunteer to participate in the investigation. Ma turned pale. He had never been in the Luang Prabang area, but had heard lurid stories about what the Pathet Lao might do to a captured Air America Chinese doctor. Finally, Ben told Ma to take an hour to think over the proposal, then return and inform him of his decision. The doctor nodded, but was visibly shaken. After his departure, Ben and Wayne shared a hearty laugh.

Within the allotted hour, the doctor returned to the office. He stated nervously, *"Mister Moore, I want you to know that I am honored by your offer and am willing to participate. However, I must inform you that my family is against it, so I must respectfully refuse."* At these words, both Ben and Wayne had trouble constraining laughter. Doctor Ma's family was in Taiwan, and in those days, there was no method available for him to contact them and receive a reply in just an hour. ²

I soon received a bit of good news: no helicopter pilot would be terminated in the near future. There was no reason specified, but a logical explanation certainly factored in the worsening Lao situation. The information concerning semi-tenure took the edge off my anxiety, but I was still skeptical of Company motives, and planned to evaluate the job situation the following year. In addition to this favorable word, an incredulous rumor surfaced that USG (read State Department) did not regard helicopter support in Laos as valuable as during

² EW Knight Email, 06/01/00.

previous years. We knew that the leftists continued to complain about H-34 participation in the conflict, and that the embassy was under constant political pressure to do something about this. Without knowing all the details, I could not understand this attitude. *Given the level of future refugee relief and projected troop movements, just how was this task going to be accomplished without helicopter support?* We were not living in the Middle Ages, and Merlin type magic was no longer feasible.

Politics and money fueled a large portion of the Lao war. Fortunately, for those involved in long term planning, sage upper echelon persons understood a continuing need and the requirements for helicopters, also sufficient personnel to man existing and projected machines should the situation warrant. Once gone from the Theater, the enormous expense and difficulty of soliciting and transporting pilots back to the field likely far exceeded the paltry amount of money required to maintain crews in Udorn. We also suspected that pilot and crew manning depended on Customer requests. They indicated current and future needs, and the Company supplied whatever was required. If the new contract forced Air America to assume the expense and excess overhead of maintaining extra pilots, the roster most likely would have been slashed to one pilot per helicopter and a spare man to cover sickness and holidays.

Following the Sam Tong RON, I realized that John Timmon's .357 was too heavy and far too much gun for me. With a need for some protection upcountry, Baron's pitch and offer to sell me the lighter and more utilitarian .22 caliber Ruger Blackhawk seemed an excellent alternative. Therefore, more than a little embarrassed, I went to Asian Acres and returned John's weapon. I could tell he was not happy, but as no transaction had actually been enacted, he had no recourse other than to be philosophical about the dumb Captain.

I wrote a check to Baron in the amount of seventy-four dollars and seventy cents and the prearranged transaction was conducted late in the day on the dusty taxiway well away from prying eyes. The new weapon, still in its original box, was wrapped in oily, brown protective paper. Jim added a box of .22-magnum hollow point ammunition gratis. I did not question him, but wondered how the Air America base Security Chief overtly sold guns to the employees when Company policy was adamant about us not possessing them. Certainly, someone higher up either knew about or sanctioned the dealings.

RAINS

The beginning of the monsoon season in Udorn significantly impacted the city, foretelling an extra wet period. With minimum run-off capability available, all the klongs quickly filled to the brim. While rain actually fell there was a little relief from the heat. However, between rain squalls the misery index soared, as heat and humidity seemed measurably worse. During such periods, when the road in front of the house dried, raised white patches appeared on the red surface where natural salt or minerals leached from the soil. With contaminated soil like that, it was easy to understand why the impoverished northeast region produced so few crops in comparison to Thailand's lush central growing region. The mineral also made me wonder how long ago this part of the world was immersed in seawater. Visible from the road, previously dried, cracked rice paddies filled. To the delight of the seine, or cast-net hunter-gatherers, hibernating fish, snails, and frogs clawed their way to the surface from deep underground to resume worldly pursuits and provide essential food for the poor and needy.

Walking to the main road from Sopa Villa was no joy during the wet season. This was especially true while wearing the

uniform of the day; shorts, "T" shirt, and shower shoes. Called flip-flops, the footwear was endearingly named for the distinctive sound they made while walking. However, the designer never considered the problem involved in muddy conditions and the toll it exacted on one's rear legs and torso. Namely, every flip caused the ground slop to indiscriminately splatter one's backside, fouling one's uniform. The only method available to avoid the problem was to walk barefooted and risk exposure to hookworm, or remain home. *What could be worse?* Well, an occasional fly-bloated carcass of a decomposing dog floating in the klong and stinking horribly certainly exceeded flip-flop problems.

After aborting a Hong Kong trip because of the mysterious sickness, and finished flying for the month, I decided to attempt another visit toward the end of June. There was additional motivation now for the trip: despite attempts, I had no success finding a Honda crankshaft either in Thailand or Laos. It was difficult to fathom that no business owner stocked such a part for the popular Japanese machine. Still, the fatalistic Thai people seemed to believe that all machinery ran forever without replacing parts or preventive maintenance, and attempted to prove this theory. Increasingly, it was a rare day when one failed to observe an abandoned truck on the side of the main road with a broken wheel or axle. As with the case of the "Gray Ghost" in Okinawa, a repair shop would have had any vehicle up and running overnight, and in my case, manufactured a crankshaft from scratch to exact Honda specifications.

In the meantime, despite the heat, I decided that rather than continue vegetating, I should do something to further stimulate my brain. As a habit instilled early on me by my Mother (during my grade school days, she read me the entire Bible during lunch periods), I loved to read. At the time, the

only publications I received through the mail were the *Marine Corps Gazette* and *Time Magazine*. Scrounging Bangkok newspapers and an occasional trip to the USIS library across town was generally satisfying, but I felt the need for more meaty literary material.

In addition to being funny, an interesting conversationalist, and storyteller, Tom Moher was well read. He possessed an extensive library of "pirated" books (printed without regard for copyright) that he purchased for a fraction of their original cost on Taiwan long before restrictions prevented their export from the island. Therefore, I went to his stilt-type house off to the side of airport road close to the Air America access road to chat and borrow reading material.³

The Mohers' living room was well appointed with virtually indestructible bamboo and rattan furniture. Inclusive of cushions, the set included chairs, couch, and coffee table, that he had bought at a reasonable equivalent of sixty dollars. I liked the durable collection and considered purchasing a set and sending it home should I part company with the Company.

When I walked into the room, a pilot opting to leave Air America shortly was recording his upcountry experiences. For some time, Tom had been taking notes and conducted pilot interviews intended as material for a book he planned to write about Air America someday. That someday might be soon, for at management's urging, he considered taking a long overdue home

³ Attesting to Tom's droll humor, according to Nick Burke, in memory of his run in with Taipei management after flying through a bamboo thicket under fire, Tom named his dog "Rouss."



Former United States Information Services (USIS) building located across the street from Udorn City Park. USIS opened the facility in 1963 and then relocated to Khon Kaen ten years later. USIS representatives, Consuls, and Vice Counsels Gordon Murchie, Ralph Jans, Bob Charleton, and others had their offices in the building. Joe Tansobasak and wife Jun (better known as the "dog lady of Udorn") maintained the library.

Author Collection.

leave.⁴

I looked over his extensive collection and chose the first volume of Churchill's World War Two works. It provided the heavy reading I desired, and over time at my leisure, I read succeeding volumes.

⁴ Tom Moher composed a manuscript draft about Air America before his death in the 1970s and it resided in a bank vault. Charlie Weitz was reputed to have read it while in Hawaii. My attempts to borrow the "book" from Kathy resulted in failure.

Supply of the opposing parties on the Plain of Jars created a two-edged sword. Communist hostilities threatened Lao viability and existence as a free country. At the same time, Souvanna Phouma constantly received intelligence reports of enemy convoys moving behind Pathet Lao lines and North Vietnamese "construction" workers positioned at Khang Khay. Events tended to reinforce and solidify Souvanna Phouma and Kong Le's late awakening regarding the communists' real intentions. In addition, previous complaints from Soviet leaders, NATO allies, and the ICC regarding ceasefire violations were waning.

In "Foggy Bottom" Washington and around the world, diplomatic attempts to stabilize Laos politically continued to be ineffective. Therefore, National Security Agency officials' efforts focused on stimulating cohesive State Department and Pentagon military planning for alternatives in the Lao situation. Alarmed by Kong Le's diminishing hold on positions in the country, and communist gains, the National Security Council (NSC) forwarded to the President three proposed phased measures: gradual escalation with the objective of stimulating renewal of the coalition government under the Geneva Accords provisions, a partition of forces under a Neutralist government, and return of a cease-fire monitored by close ICC supervision.

Phased plans included increased support to Meo, FAN, and FAR forces by manipulating the Geneva Agreements to include overt Geneva violations; U.S. aerial reconnaissance; non-combatant use of USG forces; and, as a last resort, the introduction of U.S. combat forces and bombing missions over North Vietnam.

NSC recommended that the first phase start immediately. To a degree, much of this was already quietly occurring under Department of Defense and Central Intelligence Agency auspices. Vague, non-specific terms like increase, step up, expand, and augment, were employed to describe twelve facets of proposed military action. Most items projected a tailored escalation. Namely, the plan assured additional aid to RLA, FAN, and Meo guerrilla forces, an upgrading of Lao intelligence using Military Region Three Kha tribals, and an enlargement of South Vietnamese border patrols to collect intelligence and attack North Vietnamese Army troops entering their country. One mouth-watering article in the rumor mill provided T-28 planes equipped with sufficient armament to the Royal Lao Air Force to conduct reprisal strikes.

Should the initial phase prove ineffective in discouraging enemy encroachment, a second segment was tailored to achieve and boost the identical objective by implementing further aggressive military roles. Some of these actions included air reconnaissance, an increase in military advisors, selective RLG ground and air offensives, retention of U.S. SEATO forces in Thailand, enlarging guerrilla units, and expanding operations into enemy territory. Dispatching air units to Thailand, and sending a Naval task force into the South China Sea were also planned. ¹

A National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) indicated that the communists (USSR, China, North Vietnamese, and Pathet Lao) were proceeding under an established timetable and were not currently interested in any settlement or partition of Laos. In previous

¹ Edward Keefer and Glenn LaFantasie eds., *Lao Crises*, 476. Memorandum NSC to JFK, 14 June 1963. Van Staaveren, 16. Arthur Dommen, *Conflict in Laos*. Tom Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 161.

years, when USG had expressed an interest in using force, Democratic Vietnamese Republic leaders, not desiring a confrontation with the U.S., had backed off from aggressive actions, and waited for waning pressures to again pursue their quest for area domination.

Recent activity impinging on Neutralist forces constituted an enemy reaction to the lack of leftist faction's political progress, a response to local developments, exploitation of RLA weakness, and a perceived decline in U.S. attention to Laos. The communists probably surmised that the West, for geopolitical constraints, was reluctant to take positive action in Laos. Additionally, the Lao military was so disorganized and weak that the West could never use the Lao army to advantage in countering commie moves. ²

As to the assessment of overt military activity, any FAR air offensive would increase political attacks on the U.S., and encourage heavy AAA usage by third country units. Then, if these measures were deemed ineffective, cross border fighter aircraft from South Vietnam might be employed.

If the U.S. chose not to deploy forces to adjacent areas, it would display a lack of credible intentions regarding the Lao situation.

In a cautionary note, deferring to the China factor, the report stated that U.S. air attacks on North Vietnam would precipitate hostilities with China. Then, unable to counter American air power, the Chinese would seek better equipment from the Soviets.

² In the Author's view, this assessment failed to realize the strengthening Meo presence and potential to wage a successful guerrilla war.

Unable to adequately predict future enemy responses beyond local military reactions, the report stated that phase one or two might ultimately result in reestablishment of the Government of National Union or a de facto partition of the country. However, because of the ease of enemy subversion, no enduring stabilization could occur. ³

After reviewing National Security Council (NSC) recommendations and NIE, the President vowed to react to new communist attacks with vigor--one of President Kennedy's favorite words. Consequently, on the 19th, JFK approved Phase One, which would be implemented at the direction of "appropriate officials." He directed State to consult with French and British representatives before conducting any action, and to solicit suggestions pertaining to the Lao situation.

Defense would supply the bullets, beans, and bandages to FAR and FAN. The tiny RLAf would receive combat aircraft. CIA would increase Meo and eastern Military Region Three programs. Guerrilla forces would be increased to 21,000 and be employed more aggressively. A Mekong Valley buffer zone of self-defense villages was to be created from Sayaboury Province to the Cambodian border.

President Kennedy also approved Phase Two for planning, but restricted any implementation pending his consultation. ⁴

Over the following two months, the U.S. Army-staffed Requirements Office (RO) attached to the Embassy began providing additional equipment in the form of howitzers and heavy mortars to equip two FAN battalions. With Souvanna Phouma's and USG

³ CIA Report, Communist Reaction to U.S. Actions Taken with Regard to Laos, 18 June 1963.

⁴ Gravel Edition, Volume 2, 726 *The Pentagon Papers*, "National Security Action Memorandum 249, 25 Jun. 1963. Tom Ahern, 161-162.

approval to create a T-28 force to intimidate and dissuade enemy aggression, "MAAG Laos" arranged to train a class of six RLAF pilots and six mechanics at Koke Kathiem (Lop Buri, Sierra-15 located north of Bangkok), Thailand, on 2 July.

Concurrent with continued enemy shelling of FAR-FAN positions on the Plain of Jars, toward the end of July, three T-28s were transferred to the Royal Lao air Force. By late August, along with a USAF Mobile Training Team to conduct initial instruction and maintenance at Wattay Airport, the remaining three planes were delivered to replace the obsolete RLAF T-6s.

President Kennedy also approved increased Meo ADC paramilitary operations, additional Special Guerrilla Units (SGU), increased use of PARU advisory teams, and limited offensive operations by FAR, FAN, and RLAF. However, during this period, he failed to move to a higher level, which would authorize more overt portions of Phase Two, specifying air reconnaissance, deployment of military advisors to the FAR, harassment of Vietnamese air cargo resupply in Sam Neua Province, and deployment of an USAF advisory unit to the RLAF.

The folks at Langley helped with the memorandum that crossed the President's desk. Therefore, when approved, field officers increased emphasis on Meo programs in progress. Soon Meo Special Operations Teams (SOT) began operating and recruiting in areas in and around Xieng Khouang Province. Within five months their efforts added 2,000 new recruits to Vang Pao's forces. ⁵

⁵ Ken Conboy, 100.

Joe Leeker, Air America in Laos 3-in combat: Air America in air combat Water Pump
(<http://www.utdallas.edu/library/collections/speccoll/Leeker/laos3.pdf>)

Victor Anthony, 88-89.

Tom Ahern, 163.

As an alternative to a long, boring helicopter trip to Bangkok, Bob Hamblin flew me there in his Beech Baron in just under an hour. It certainly was the way to travel, and I really appreciated the ride. However, continued flights to Bangkok on Company and Bird aircraft were in jeopardy, for Thai Airway officials had already complained to Air America that free transportation for business, but mostly pleasure, cost them lost revenue. Discontinuance of the free travel presented a great disservice to us, and often delayed or thwarted travel plans.

Connections were smooth, and on the 21st, after retrieving my roundtrip ticket from the friendly ladies at the Civil Air Transport office located on the corner of Patpong and Suriwongse roads, I was off for what I considered real civilization and an improvement over my present lot. A good feeling immediately enveloped me when I slipped into my spacious, plush seat on the splendidly appointed "Worm." Reinforcing and enhancing my sentiment, the beautiful, wonderfully perfumed "stus" offered me a fetching smile, sweets, and cold towel. I had flown in the aircraft before, but still marveled over the purely Chinese-inspired interior, which CAT spared no expense to create.

Landing at Khai Tak airport in the early 1960s provided all the excitement and high adventure a soul could experience. A single runway jutted far out into Hong Kong Bay and landing long was not an appealing option. The instrument landing system landing system, providing the only approved approach, was located on a hill festooned with high-rise housing units and tall television antennae. Low clouds invariably hung over this complex. Flying between this mixture of buildings and clouds caused my heart to accelerate beyond normal limits. After the

hairy approach, I considered myself quite fortunate in being able to control my destiny as a rotary wing pilot, and wondered if the "Worm's" main gear contained any television antennae.

Jim Coble had recommended that I stay at the International Hotel in Kowloon, where his wife Bonny temporarily worked as a receptionist while renewing a restricted Thai visa. I did not have a reservation, and the International was full, so Bonnie suggested I stay at Kowloon's relatively new Park Hotel adjoining the waterfront. After carrying my luggage to the room, the diminutive attendant boldly inquired if I desired female company. When I declined the offer, shuffling his feet and mumbling to himself, he whined that the side deal provided the only means in which he could supplement his meager salary. The room faced the bay, providing a spectacular nighttime view of the expansive harbor and Hong Kong Island. Seen by an observer through the huge picture window, ships and boats bobbed on the water, their lights sparkling in harmony with the tidal flow. On the island's north face, illuminated apartments and homes of the super wealthy flowed up slopes into inky darkness.

It was wonderful to be away from the Udorn heat, humidity, and mud. Therefore, over the next four nights and five days, I attempted to soak up sufficient luxury to last for some time. Unfortunately, nothing in life is a hundred percent perfect, as proved true on this trip, for there was a severe water shortage in the Colony. At a premium, and strictly mandated by law, hotel shower water was only available from seven to eight o'clock in the evening. It seemed I was back on a U.S. Navy ship enjoying restricted water hours. To satisfy interim bathing needs, the hotel staff provided a small bucket containing the precious liquid. Actually, I was fortunate staying in the hotel, because many apartments received running water only once during a four-day period, and local people queued for hours on the street to

obtain a single bucket. I learned that there was also a severe drought in North Vietnam. Since living in Udorn, water was one commodity I took for granted and this denial was something new to me in this supposedly "civilized" area of the world.

With termination of check cashing privileges in Udorn and having insufficient time to obtain dollars in Bangkok, I walked a short distance to the Civil Air Transport office in the opulent Peninsula Hotel. "Brad" Bradburn, the first CAT employee Connie Barsky and I had met in early 1962, was still the manager there. Friendly and cooperative, he was on top of the world, living the good life, at a time when Hong Kong was considered the center of Asian mystery, intrigue, and fun. I cashed a check on the account of Civil Air Transport for 300 dollars. "Brad's" assistant Charlie was still wandering the streets of Kowloon wearing walking shorts, and he provided me information about decent eating establishments. Beside a normal fare of steak and potatoes, I tried cold Borscht, a cream-based beet soup, at the Russian restaurant and was not disappointed.

I quickly recognized that prices had substantially increased since my last trip to the area over a year ago. Therefore, intending to conserve money, I vowed to avoid bars and expensive ladies, and center my activities on shopping for selected items and sightseeing.

My first task involved a trip to the Honda dealer to purchase a crankshaft. High hopes were shattered upon discovering that someone had recently purchased the last four shafts in stock. The proprietor indicated that he would not receive any more from Japan for two months. Having exhausted my search for the item, I left discouraged, but managed to obtain the Honda company's address.

Next on my shopping agenda was the purchase of footwear. On the way to the Lee Kee boot shop, I had to pass Devi's, an

Indian tailor shop. Spying me, a young man promising fantastic bargains attempted to entice me into his shop and interest me in a suit and some shirts. At first, I refused to purchase anything because of a reputedly poor quality of thread used and lack of confidence in the slick salesman. However, he was persistent and over the next two days of hustling, plying me with beer, and PR, he finally coaxed me into purchasing a tailor-made black suit along with matching shirts. Satisfying the churning tourist Mecca, workers threw the suit together overnight. After minor altering, paying fifty-four dollars on the day of my departure, I departed with my new clothes. Overwhelmed by the "good deals," subject to impulsive buying perils, like many items one purchased without careful consideration in Hong Kong, I disliked the cheap suit and never wore it.

The experience was different at the recommended Lee Kee bootery. I had previously traded with the popular establishment while in the service and was completely satisfied with the handcrafted product. After tracing one's foot and taking other necessary measurements, within a few days a patron walked away with quality merchandise that fit like a glove and cost only ten dollars. I bought a pair of mid-ankle suede Chukka type boots.

One buying opportunity I wanted to take advantage of was the purchase of a good quality typewriter. Mostly because of very pretty girls in the class, during my high school senior year, I had taken a year-long typing course. Although I was never particularly accomplished on the machine, the ability to type served me very well at Duke. After graduating, except for a brief period at the Quantico T&T Regiment, I never typed again. However, like riding a bicycle, after borrowing Sam Jordon's machine to write a lesson outline for our Rousselot-inspired morning sessions, I found that I had not forgotten how to type. Having a taste of something better, I was tired of hand writing

letters, and knew that my people at home could barely decipher the illegible scrawl with which I was cursed. It would have been nice if public schools had demanded the beautiful English cursive handwriting prevalent in my Father's day.

With that goal in mind, I crossed the harbor on the Star Ferry and made my way to the China Fleet Club, a U.S. Navy post exchange. Still in possession of my green military ID card, after lunch I purchased an Olympia deluxe portable typewriter for cash. Before leaving the Club, I bought a black Gladstone-type bag to carry items for upcountry RON's. That night, using Park stationery, and over next two days, I wrote the first of many script-font letters home. Besides describing my adventures thus far, recognizing a possible future requirement to wear a weapon, I requested that my folks send my leather shoulder harness by Army post office (APO) mail.

During the course of my wanderings around Hong Kong Island, I boarded the Victoria Peak tram to view the harbor and Kowloon from the island side. I had ridden the fifty-degree incline once before with squadron mate Connie Barsky, but this time the ride really bothered me. Probably a similar problem for many people, I always had an acrophobic aversion to heights. However, flying never bothered me, for cockpits presented an illusion of being enclosed in a safe room.

With me, the height issue was relative, one overcome with time and exposure. Like my Anderson cousins before me, during summer recess from the university, I had worked at the Harris Steel Company in New Market, New Jersey. Owner Mister Harris believed in hiring college students for temporary work, and as his family and my Aunt Jenny Anderson attended the same Methodist church, I enjoyed a leg up on other potential applicants. Over a two-year period, I earned sufficient money to pay semester tuition, as employees went on vacation and I

replaced them at their machines. That summer, I performed nearly every job in the plant related to the structural steel business: heating rivets, rolling, bending, cutting, grinding, scraping, and riveting. Those few tasks I was not assigned to, such as template work, burning and welding, I observed and felt that with minimum experience I could even perform these tasks. During the second year, the foreman sent me across the street to help Mister Harris's son erect a new building. Part of my duties involved installing bolts connecting the structure's "I" beams. Working ninety-feet above the concrete floor on three-inch-wide girders at first was terrifying, and the laughter from other employees embarrassing, as I slid along the beams on my backside. I overcame my terror of heights and within two weeks, without fear or abandon, I too ran along the narrow steel pathways.

The trip ended too soon and on Tuesday, after cashing a check at the CAT office and writing another for forty-eight dollars to the Park Hotel, I left for Don Muang Airport.

Because of poor connections in Bangkok, I was a day late returning to Udorn. The delay allowed me to cash a Jim Walker countersigned check at the moneychanger's office across the street from the Company office. The 4,000 baht would provide sufficient funds to meet my immediate needs for some time. Despite the tardy return from STO, since my services were not required upcountry, Ab graciously did not penalize me a day's pay as he had others.

The Air America Club continued to be the most popular location to dine and gather. Outsiders patiently waited their turn to enter. Ben Moore did not rest on his laurels, but continued to solicit volunteer labor to build a motorbike parking area. In addition, near term plans, utilizing pilot labor, envisioned construction of an employee swimming pool between the Club and Operations building.

Our outfit had its share of colorful characters, and one was rotund John Scott, a former Marine enlisted man from Philadelphia. "Scotty" flew as a Flight Mechanic until, perceiving an imminent crash on an upcountry landing zone, jumped from the helicopter at a low altitude. Thereafter, functioning as a ground mechanic, he rarely flew except on an occasional test flight. A professed party animal, he lived within walking distance of Sopa Villa and often invited me to his lavish parties. However, his generous spending required that he borrow money from me and most likely other people. A man of enormous charisma, I liked Scotty, and at payday, he never failed to reimburse my loans.

A COMPANION

Even before my relationship with Fairy waned, and then terminated, continuing my randy, non-celibate lifestyle, I had begun an informal relationship with Dan Gardner's live in "maid," Sang.¹ I first met Sang in the Jute Box before learning she was theoretically Dan's private stock. The chemistry clicked between us and one thing led to another. Over time, we became casually involved. Before leaving Air America, after observing

¹ Thai last names were difficult to pronounce and not deemed important, therefore, I never knew hers.

Sang departing Sopa Villa in a samlor, Nick Burke stopped to chide me over my choice of women. Then he callously informed me that one day he and others had by chance observed Sang and another girl entwined in a compromising position. Pleasantly recalling her friendship and considerable female talents, I was a little surprised over this revelation. Despite learning of her obvious lesbian overtones, our relationship continued. *Moreover, what business was it for married men to delve into the relationships of bachelors? Was it actual concern or simply envy?*

One day I learned that Dan had ejected Sang from his house. Noting a lack of Western style eating establishments in town, especially those offering clean salads, in conjunction with a Thai partner to evade Thai anti-foreigner policy, and to avoid the no-conflict-of-interest stipulation in the Company personnel manual, Dan opened the Wolverine restaurant on upper Adulyadet Road. Since a solely owned American business would displace a Thai, and roil government officials, the Company was quite adamant about enforcing the regulation. This was recently evidenced when Abadie was jacked up by Taipei management over leasing needed transportation vehicles. A greedy individual, the original vehicle lessee charged unrealistic rates, so Ab established a company that drastically reduced the monthly rates. Although beneficial to employees and the Company, when discovered, his contribution to the transportation department ceased.

I heard that Dan was going to leave Air America soon to assist in the operation of his Uncle's Hawaiian hotel, and regarded the decision a primary reason for discharging Sang. However, this was not his real motivation, as I learned while eating with him one evening at the Wolverine. Asked why, his laconic, but honest answer surprised me, as I expected

unfaithfulness to be the answer. With typical Gardner frankness, he stated that he had wearied of her offensive garlic breath. That was difficult to dispute, for Thais liberally employed the pungent bulb to flavor diverse foods. Despite this human frailty, I was extremely lonely, and gradually introduced the young lady into my life.

Dan left the Company to become Assistant Manager of the Kauai Surf Hotel in Lihu. While returning from home leave, Wayne and Lai Knight visited him in January 1964. Dan obtained room discounts and arranged extensive island tours for his friends.

Tragically, Dan later disappeared after he and his fiancée departed the island at night in her small fixed wing Cessna.²

ABADIE DEPARTS FOR TAIPEI

Surprising everyone, one day Abadie disappeared. Bob Rousselot had inquired if he would consider working with him in Taipei as the Special Assistant to the Vice President of Operations. A vacancy had been created when Jim Glerum, a former Navy intelligence officer and current undercover CIA officer, left for home leave and advanced training in Washington for eventual reassignment to Udorn. Considering the move a choice career opportunity, Ab readily accepted Rousselot's offer.

Dated 1 July 1963, the personnel action letter stipulated that a suitably qualified replacement for Abadie was required in Udorn, and the new helicopter Chief Pilot would be obtained from the present supervisory ranks. A disclaimer allowed that Ab would be available to return to his former position should the helicopter operation expand.

² EW Knight Emails, 05/21/00, 05/24/00, 05/30/00.

Largely by default, Assistant Chief Pilot Jim Coble logically advanced to the vacant chief pilot slot. Exercising patronage, Jim chose favorites to assist him. He advanced Viril Black to a de facto Assistant Chief Pilot Helicopters position. Selecting Black was a wise choice, for everyone liked Viril. He was a calm, methodical person, not prone to flying off the handle, and what Jim liked best about the man, he was not part of the "boys' club," the drinking, card playing group. To supplement their efforts, when either man was absent, Jim tapped Jerry McEntee to assist in minor duties involving training, test, and upcountry check rides. Scratch Kanach and Wayne Knight also helped in the same capacity as requirements dictated.

While Coble was with Air America, he considered himself merely a toiler in the field. Attempting to perform his job as well as he could, he harbored no political ambitions and did not attempt to curry favor with either Company or Customer types. Like Abadie, he was not socially inclined. He had no problem being friendly, but found it difficult associating with anyone in the heavy drinking and card playing group. Instead, he was happy at home with Bonnie, and they occasionally visited other quiet married couples.

According to the table of organization, Jim worked for Regional Chief Pilot, Fred Walker. However, no one paid much attention to this structure and with the title of Project Chief of Operations (COO), sandwiched between Ben Moore, Jim actually worked for Bob Rousselot. Hence, at Coble's level, every facet of the organization began and ended with the all-powerful VPO.

A humorous anecdote described his cool relationship with Fred Walker, who prepared daily fixed wing schedules. Each day, anticipating dissemination to the helicopter pilots, he dispatched forty copies to Udorn. After discarding schedules for two months, Jim sent Fred a memorandum questioning his reasoning

for the waste of paper. In conclusion, he requested that if Fred continued sending fixed wing schedules to Udorn, he print them on softer, absorbent paper calculated for more important use. As one could imagine, Fred took maximum exception to Coble's memorandum, and in a cable demanded Jim's presence in Vientiane. Jim ignored twelve similar cables and phone calls. He eventually informed Ben Moore about the episode and thought Ben would suffer apoplexy while laughing. Jim never confronted Fred and, except in official Company correspondence, they never talked to each other again. ³

During Abadie's year in Taipei, lacking a well-defined role or proper experience required for the job, and confronted with an excess of paperwork and not enough activity, he considered himself a fish out of water. Rouss was a great boss to work for, but possessed his own agenda and Ab was not forceful in his position. Not a CIA employee like Glerum, he was restricted from engaging in Agency business and involvement in deep black projects. Consequently, he failed to achieve the substantial effectiveness of the former Special Assistant.

Furthermore, he discovered fixed wing assignments difficult to implement since he was not a high-time, seasoned airplane pilot, knowledgeable like senior pilots who had operated in that part of the world for many years, some with Rousselot in China. During the course of his duties, he journeyed to Tachikawa, Japan, where Base Manager Doc Lewis provided him with an orientation. Although they treated him respectfully, he believed older pilots at Tachi were not pleased with his new assignment because he was youthful and relatively new to the Company. Therefore, to gain large fixed wing experience and employee

³ Jim Coble Emails, 04/13/02, 04/14/02, 04/15/02, 04/16/02, 04/18/02.

rapport, he flew on round-the-island flights in the DC-4 and PBY as co-pilot with Don Teeters and Van Bednakoff.

Over time, Abadie noted that VPFO Bob Rousselot did not fully agree with many policy items issued from the Taipei and Washington offices of Hugh Grundy and George Doole. Furthermore, he did not appear especially happy in his position. However, until actually deciding to terminate his long employment with CAT/AAM, Bob Rousselot never indicated an intention to leave the Company. At some time, Rousselot also alienated Al Wueste, Tainan Maintenance Vice President, and when Ab traveled to that station for an orientation, he received a cold shoulder treatment.

When Tom Boyd replaced Rousselot, Abadie could not help him phase into the job because he had not been in Taipei long enough to really know what was going on, and had barely adjusted to the work schedule himself. Therefore, since Boyd needed to quickly familiarize himself regarding Company and CIA business, he did most of the work himself. Keeping Ab out of the loop on the most sensitive items, the new VPO mainly used him as little else than a sounding board for helicopter operations. Eventually, because he lacked CIA contacts and was not an "old China hand," Ab realized he was definitely not needed in Taipei. Therefore, Boyd, who Ab characterized as a nice individual, treated him well, and would never offend anyone, agreed with Abadie that he was ineffective in the Special Assistant job and should return to Udorn, where he would be more comfortable and benefit the expanding program there. ⁴

⁴ CJ Abadie Emails, 01/25/99, 02/19/99.
Request for Personnel Action VPO-RPA-63-129, 1 July 1963.

THE GREEN HOUSE

After Jim Coble moved up the management ladder, to be nearer the Air America compound, he moved from the four-unit compound north of town to a large green house adjoining the airport highway. The place was located directly in front of Chet's compound where Charley Weitz and Bill Pearson lived. Built like a fortress, the two-story structure was surrounded by a high, concrete green wall.

Soon after Abadie left for the Company headquarters and Jim relocated to the house, the Company installed a phone line from operations to the residence so Jim could be available around the clock, rather than the twelve to fourteen hours he normally spent in the office. However, the communications net did not last more than fifteen days, for quemoys pilfered first one set of wires, then another for the prized copper.

While the phone line was still intact, a bizarre incident occurred involving his wife and their cocker spaniel, Jimmy. At 1400 hours, Jim received a call from a very distraught Bonnie, pleading with him to come home immediately. Arriving within five minutes, he discovered Bonnie shaking violently and bordering on the verge of hysterics in the upstairs shower room. Wet and limp, the dog was draped ominously over the washtub. After determining that his wife was all right, he turned his attention to the dog and began mouth to nose artificial respiration. However, his efforts proved fruitless and Jimmy departed for that great pup kennel in the sky.

When events diminished to a dull roar, Jim attempted to assess what likely perpetrated the incident. Sometime during the day, Jimmy had contacted a foul-smelling item and urgently required a bath. Therefore, Bonnie carried the dog and tub into the shower room, closed the door to prevent the animal from leaving, and began filling the container with hot water provided

by the demand type LPG water heater so popular in the American community at the time. The device worked well, provided adequate water pressure was present to activate the heater. Six feet from the floor three four by six-inch openings vented the heater's exhaust fumes. On a normal day, the holes would have provided adequate carbon monoxide (CO) venting. However, on this day a light breeze blew against the apertures. Soon the small room filled with the deadly, colorless poisonous gas, rendering Bonnie and the dog unconscious. Mrs. Coble collapsed on the floor where the carbon monoxide was less concentrated and soon regained consciousness. The unfortunate canine drowned in the water. Last rites and final interment were performed in the klong adjacent to the Coble residence. Ever philosophic, Jim firmly believed Bonnie learned a hard lesson about heaters and wind direction that day. ⁵

⁵ Jim Coble Emails, 03/08/02, 04/15/02.
Ben Moore July 1963 Monthly Report to Headquarters Taipei.

Independence Day 1963, I deadheaded to Sam Tong on a Helio Courier flown by Milt Olsen ("Uncle Milty" to his friends) for what turned out to be a very bizarre RON. Overlapping our RON's once again, Mike Marshall deadheaded up on the first to fly my assigned aircraft, Hotel-14. A prolonged spate of bad weather had prevented normal Caribou landings or airdrops at Sam Tong, creating a critical shortage of H-34 aviation gasoline. The first day's flying exhausted the remaining fuel drums. However, an abundant supply of Helio Courier fuel remained in the refueling area. During the course of our Marine Corps career, if it was necessary to complete a mission, we occasionally used or mixed a lower grade 100/130 fuel with the higher 115/145 octane gas. (The former was a green color, the latter purple.) Other than cylinder head temperatures (CHT) running a little higher than normal, minimum power loss, and a requirement for a logbook notation as to the duration of use, this was not particularly detrimental to the R-1820 engine. Therefore, to continue working, and not averse to using the lower grade, Mike elected to burn the green colored fuel. Bill Cook was also at the site flying Hotel-15. The former Army pilot had never previously used the lower octane fuel. Having recently crashed Hotel Foxtrot, and harboring reservations about any change in fueling procedures, he elected to stand down and wait for a fresh shipment of the correct juice. Therefore, until a shipment arrived, the Customer sanctioned and Bill chose to double up with Marshall for lengthy northern trips to Bouam Long (VS-88).

Shifting monsoon area weather patterns improved, allowing a small fuel shipment to arrive late on the second. The following day, carrying fuel drums, the duo launched in Bill's ship,

Hotel-15, for Site-88 and ended the day with an outstanding nine hours.

When I arrived at Site-20, monsoon conditions moved through, socking in the area, and temporarily grounding me. The two senior pilots attempted to fly a couple of local missions. With two cockpit Captains still sanctioned, I later doubled with Mike and Flight Mechanic Gene Lloyd for part of a fuel load. The warehouse was crowded that night with three crews, consequently, Pop and Thongsar found beds elsewhere. After wash up and dinner, the cry of "deal them papes" was heard and the poker game commenced. Not interested in seeing Marshall lose money, after the generator stopped and extinguished the single light bulb, I went to bed, while the game continued illuminated by candlelight. Mike regarded Pop a gentleman, but also a mean card player, and he rarely won while engaging in poker games with Pop. For sentimental purposes, he carried a cancelled check in his wallet made out to Pop for twenty dollars. ¹

Eager to commence flying, I arose early and choked down an eight ounce can of acidic tasting orange juice to get the "vital juices flowing," as actor Sterling Hayden remarked in the movie, *Doctor Strangelove*. In the back of the warehouse, near the karst, a new privy constructed of flattened steel gas drums had replaced the original thatched outhouse. For sanitation, a clever soul had driven a bamboo tube into the ground nearby to serve as a urinal.

As dawn broke, a low cloud layer along with fog and rain obscured the upper end of the runway, the adjacent ridgelines, and dominated much of the lower valley to the southeast. Conditions remained the same until late morning, so we hunkered

¹ Mike Marshall Email, 08/11/99.

mainly in the warehouse, bulling and praying for better weather. The chill from cool, humid conditions in the mountains forced me to don my cousin's old Army sweatshirt and Ike jacket. In addition to other variables, keyed up to fly and extremely bored, I became very hungry. An increase in appetite tended to diminish my small stock of provisions.

The down time enabled me to closely observe and appraise Pop and Thongsar's interaction with the Meo. After learning about the assistance, they could receive at Sam Tong, some people walked for days from far and near eagerly seeking Pop's help with a myriad of problems. I noted that Pop especially loved children. For this reason, quite a few mothers came to obtain milk for their babies. Although I could not understand the language, often the meaning was clear. While holding court, the two AID men appeared compassionate to the people's demands, doling out the few supplies, staples, and available medicines. However, looking through his glasses directly at an individual, Pop normally spoke loudly and looked very severe. As the supreme "Father Figure" of these refugees, I guessed this comprised part of his act to maintain an exalted image and continue to command the respect he acquired over time. While Thongsar, who fully supported Pop, translated, the small, bald man crossed his arms and basked in the people's heartfelt adulation.

Before long, I discovered that Thongsar was a shrewd trader and a little larcenous, a sort of middleman between Meo artisans and those individuals who desired to own native artifacts. Silver necklaces fashioned from beaten French piasters, crossbows, and handmade flintlock rifles made great collectables and could be purchased by crewmembers or other visitors. In the early days, I was never particularly acquisitive regarding souvenirs. Therefore, I never discovered whether this operation constituted a service to aid us, or simply a greed-driven

Thongsar for profit operation, although rumors indicated that the latter was more plausible. As time passed and additional requirements for the more popular items such as necklaces continued, prices escalated, and Thongsar's reputation suffered among us pilots. After all, he did use American assets to procure the items. Moreover, as Pop's authority and influence increased, Thongsar seemed to change and I noted an imperious attitude toward us.

Regardless of minor annoyances, Pop, Thongsar, and Ward maintained a tight ship and one had to admire their persistence and devotion to duty in such a remote and forlorn backwater of the country. Located so close to the enemy-held Plain of Jars, I sometimes wondered about our security, but Pop insisted it was no problem. However, he did indicate that we all had high prices on our heads placed there by an invisible enemy. I visualized a wild west poster of myself tacked onto a flyspecked bamboo corner pole at the Khang Khay, Ban Ban, Xieng Khouang Ville, Sam Neua Pathet Lao headquarters, or even in Hanoi.

CAPTAIN ROMES GOES MISSING

Earlier in the day, while still in the hut, Captain Don Romes and Customer Phil DeCaro arrived in Helio Courier B-859. Those Helio pilots performed some amazing feats with their machines. During the previous RON, while looking at the clobbered conditions to the north section of the bowl, and speculating about when the clouds would lift enough to allow me to launch, Captain Joe Hazen suddenly broke out of the clouds and landed down strip. Then, as if his action constituted an everyday occurrence, the tall pilot nonchalantly strolled from his plane to our location. I guess he flew between cloud layers, recognized landmarks, and punched through a thin layer IFR. I considered his action a calculated risk, but these guys were

good and knew the area well. ² I was impressed with Joe's performance and even more so when he divulged that during 1962 he flew a lot and made 100,000 dollars--a goal that many of us erroneously considered a prerequisite for a comfortable retirement. Achievers of this goal generally heralded the milestone by hosting a large, drunken party. ³

Before I had a chance to quiz Don about how he had managed to sneak into the bowl and around the surrounding flying conditions, a loader redirected the experienced Lao hand to the Neutralist base at Moung Soui with DeCaro. ⁴

By mid-morning, after Don had not reached his destination or radioed an "ops normal," the Vientiane Operations Manager (OM) called Sam Tong declaring Don officially missing. This was not too worrisome at first, for because of low clouds it could have involved something as simple as not being able to climb high enough to make, or relay a report or landing at an alternate site. However, as the hours passed without any word, we became more concerned and speculated that weather or a mechanical malfunction had caused him to make a forced landing in the local area or while en route to Moung Soui.

The cloud cover did not lift high enough until later in the day to allow departure through the west gap. Senior pilots Cook and Marshall teamed up in Hotel-14 to commence a short search while I cooled my heels at the base. This was partially to conserve fuel and partially for safety reasons. When they

² Joe Hazen Email, 05/23/16, "*I think my view of the strip was better than your view of the sky,*"

³ Author Note: Retirement may have been possible at the time, but not for long. Within a few short years, President Johnson's unwise "guns and butter" policy during the Vietnam War and rampant inflation negated any chance of this happening.

⁴ Author Note: Pop's preference was to use the less expensive fixed wing plane vs the H-34 fuel hog.

returned without a sighting, I convinced Pop that the experience I had gained last RON flying around the area in bad weather qualified me to efficiently search the nooks and crannies abounding in the area. Mike took the left seat and Blackie Mondello crewed from below. With considerable search and rescue experience gained while in the Corps, I was confident that I would find 859.

I proceeded through the gap and dove toward the Nam Ngum. Clouds and fog still persisted, continuing to form and spill over the ridges, obscuring higher ravines and at least one half of the mountain chain's banks as it plunged toward the river. Tracing and retracing my flight path, and calling on the VHF radio net, I slowly searched ten miles of the exposed portions making slow runs up wooded ravines as far as safely possible. Then, with all eyes scanning for evidence of a silver bird, we explored the opposite bank of the river. Sites to the south that I had previously worked were covered by dark clouds, effectively exhausting discovery possibilities in that area. I decided to proceed slowly north up the river toward Xieng Dat, a route Don might have taken toward Moung Soui. At low level under the clouds, flight on the river was possible, but the further north we flew the more the riverbanks impinged on flight and narrowed, thwarting any opportunity to turn 180 degrees should fog or clouds impede our flight path. Set back into the hills, Nam Chong village was not visible nor were any other tribal hamlets sighted.

It was already late when we commenced the search, and with a descending overcast, optimum light conditions fast diminished. Therefore, after flying more than two hours, and with Mike getting antsy to RTB, I decided to reverse course and return to Site-20. Remembering Tom Moher's cautionary remarks regarding weather in the mountains and his colorful story about being

trapped for a week in a corner of the Pha Khao complex, I didn't want to be caught out with no place to land and little or no food and water. Fortunately, the gap was still barely open and we recovered just before dark.

Pop had little information concerning Don's status. Only that he had not reached MOUNG SOUI. We had to assume he was down somewhere in the areas searched, perhaps higher up on slopes inundated with clouds. With Cook rotating to Udorn, no one felt like poker, so after a "C rats" and rice supper, the glum crews and customers retired in order to arise early for another crack at finding Don.

The following morning was a replica of the prior one, with fog and low overcast conditions preventing us from launching early. When I did manage to sneak out, it was late, and Gene Lloyd and I flew less than a full fuel load. During this period, utilizing low level flying techniques, I squeezed into Ban Na with people who informed the Nai Ban about the missing plane. No one had seen him. While refueling with the last barrel of Helio fuel at the site, search parties embarked toward the friendly villages of San Luang and Houei Ki Nin in the direction of MOUNG SOUI. Because of inclement conditions, I estimated it would be some time before even hardy Meo walkers traversed the muddy trails and slopes to the areas and returned.

As each hour passed, even if they were not injured, I knew that Don and his passenger's chances of survival decreased. From the beginning of the episode, a gut feeling led me to believe Don was located somewhere west of Sam Tong and might have crashed on the slopes while attempting to return to the site. Therefore, while Marshall refueled at the base, I returned to the Nam Ngum hoping more of the mountain slopes were uncovered toward the tops, and resumed looking in the same areas as the previous day. This time, taking a calculated risk, I began low

groundspeed, high powered tree-top runs up heavily wooded ravines until forced by fog or the sheer mountain sides to quickly reverse course at almost zero groundspeed. Conducting difficult, hairy flying, at times I had only seconds to scan the wooded area and make the decision to turn. Dividing attention between the cockpit and right side of the aircraft did not constitute the most efficient search techniques, but seemed logical at the time. Although my actions were not particularly safe, after a few heart-pounding downwind runs, I gained confidence, and realized it was really the only way I could possibly cover terrain which I considered Don's most likely location. One would think a silver Helio would stick out like a sore thumb, but if it was down in that tangle of trees, brush, and chest high saw grass, we never saw it--no plane, no signals, not a hint of men or machine. Frustrated, I RTB, where I learned, despite ground teams' searches of the local area, nothing new had been found.

Like the two previous days, the seventh dawned gray, drizzly, and miserable. However, the overcast was not quite as low and I was able to depart the bowl to continue my search. A stop at Ban Na provided no new information. Remaining clear of the Plain of Jars, I explored that local area thoroughly and returned to Sam Tong.

When I entered the warehouse, Pop and Thongsar were conversing with a wizened old man, who I learned was a village shaman revered for his magical ability to cure sickness and predict events. Acknowledging the finality of the situation and our desperation at not finding 859, as a last resort, Pop had summoned the spirit doctor for assistance. With modern tools at our disposal, amazed at what we were reduced to doing, I wondered what to expect next. I looked on fascinated, as helpers spread an army blanket on the dirt floor. Then I stood in

silence as Pop, the shaman, and others sat cross-legged around the cover. With considerable aplomb, the old fellow opened the drawstring on a ragged black bag, and spilled out an assortment of his magical bones and stones. Rubbing them vigorously together, mumbling and conjuring, he cupped his hands, shook the items, and dramatically tossed them on the blanket. Then, studiously gazing at each object's position to the other, closing his eyes, he appeared to sink into a trance. While Tong Sar translated, he began to talk and pointed to the west. Yes, he indicated, Don was not far to the west of Sam Tong. Had Pop been able to read my thoughts, he probably would have called me an "educated fool." However, despite harboring a highly skeptical opinion of such a performance, after three days of finding absolutely nothing, perhaps the old man was on to something, for to me that area was the most logical place to look and the focus of my previous search.

After the old timer left, noting far improved weather conditions, I went back out in Hotel-14 with Lloyd for another look in the hilly and wooded western sector. In the meantime, Caribous began shuttling fuel and personnel into Sam Tong. Elmer Munsell arrived in Hotel-13 to relieve Marshall and fly Hotel-15.

Miracles still happen. At 1430, a villager delivered a note from Romes that began "*Dear Pop or anybody...*" The message gave the situation and indicated he was located five miles west of Sam Tong. It ended, "*I promised to give this guy... kip. Would you give it to him please?*"

A medical rescue team and a native guide were mustered and boarded Hotel-15. After landing in the crash area, the team fought their way to Don through layers and tangles of intertwined fallen trees and brush. Except for a few burns, hunger, thirst, and a red, puffed face from bee stings, he was

in good condition. Within fifteen minutes, Elmer had Don on board. The old shaman had been exactly right. ⁵

They returned to base to hatch a plan to retrieve the severely injured DeCaro. The team soon returned to the area and looked for 859. Within another fifteen minutes, they sighted the wreckage four miles west of Sam Tong. Elmer made several approaches and finally determined that because of 150-foot trees at the 3,500-foot location, he did not have sufficient power available to hover and employ the hoist. Therefore, he chose a slash and burn agricultural clearing a quarter mile away from the crash site to land and the rescue party walked to B-859. By 1615, they arrived and administered first aid to DeCaro. Because of DeCaro's weakened condition, it took Munsell and the rescue team an hour to reach Hotel-15 with him.

While this was occurring, I rolled onto the strip and taxied toward the fuel pit. Don Courtney was standing on the ramp. Before I departed the cockpit, he recognized and hailed me. Surprised, I had not seen Don since we graduated from USMC "Charm School." As brand-new Second Lieutenants, I had roomed with Art Conley and Don, first in the Camp Upshur Quonset hut, and then at the new Camp Barrett Basic School facility deep in the boonies of the Quantico military complex. Working for the Agency in the Republic of Vietnam since February, Don had been reassigned to Vientiane for ninety days at the Air Support Branch at the USAID compound. He lived at the Bird complex and ostensibly worked at the USAID Air Support Branch. ⁶ Don arrived at Sam Tong in a Helio Courier to add another pair of eyes

⁵ Afterward there was some conjecture if somehow the shaman had prior contact with the villager.

⁶ Many agents used the auspices and cover identification of either Air America or the Bird outfits over the years.



Captain Elmer Munsell.
Marius Burke Collection.

during the search, and returned to Vientiane that afternoon. We did not see each other again for several years.⁷

With the recovery already in progress, we chatted for only a short time, and then Don re-boarded his aircraft and departed. I impatiently waited on the ground at Sam Tong. Chagrined after so many fruitless days of searching, I desperately wanted to participate, but the senior man had the situation in hand and apparently there was nothing left to do. Then Tom Ward made my day, instructing me to haul a five-gallon "jerry can" of desperately needed water to the thirsty people on the ground. Within minutes, I arrived at the site in Hotel-13. Although the clearing appeared open, after circling low to assess landing possibilities, I determined that altitude, high grass, boulders, and an exceptionally steep slope precluded any touchdown. Therefore, I elected to hover and instructed old Punz to hoist the water can down to the folks on the ground.

The engine provided sufficient power to hover at an altitude high enough to avoid obstacles. However, after I slowed through transitional lift to zero ground speed and assumed a steady hover, the helicopter began an annoying lateral shudder. There was no visible indication of a wind direction, so I might have been slightly downwind. Already committed, and with the load slowly on its way to the ground, there was nothing I could do about the condition. Then with the cable halfway down and the machine violently vibrating, the left window frame assembly began to shift from its mounts. The copper wire securing the emergency release lever had broken, allowing the handle to move and release pins that held the mechanism in place. All I could do was anxiously watch the window slowly work out of the frame.

⁷ Don Courtney Emails, 08/14/02, 08/18/02, 10/24/05.

I had my hands full controlling the high hover and could never have reached across the left seat even during normal times. All I could do was helplessly watch the window detach. It was my first, but not the last encounter with the legendary Murphy thumb rule of **"If it can happen, it will happen."**

I really needed Punz in the cockpit to assist, but he was still engaged below. Getting water to the dehydrated injured victim and Romes took priority. From a safety standpoint, with no forward movement, I believed the danger of the window sailing backward into the tail rotor minimal. Because of static, wind blast, language difficulties, some older Filipino Flight Mechanics were extremely difficult to communicate with over the ICS system and defective helmet receivers. Therefore, it was far simpler to handle a cockpit situation oneself and not to confuse the issue. Still, aware that the hoist had only one speed--slow--I attempted to inform Punz of the danger and to hurry if possible. Then with Punz's head finally appearing through the left seat well, the window and frame assembly plunged to the ground. Fortunately, the gravity-propelled missile landed away from personnel waiting for the can.

Happy that I had participated in a small way during the SAR, and that Don was safe, after flying over eight hours, I flew back to Sam Tong and commandeered Hotel-14's left window before Mike left for Udorn. The survivors arrived at 1815 hours, and transportation waited to evacuate them to Vientiane.

That night we hashed over the little-known details of the incident. Information was sketchy and emerged slowly, or not at all, and other facts conflicted with logical reasoning. According to Don, during heavy rain and low visibility, he had crash landed in a small valley west of Sam Tong. A wing sheared on impact allowing fuel to leak from a ruptured tank, which soon caught fire. Despite burns to his right side, Don pulled the

incapacitated DeCaro from the right seat. Rain ceased falling in the afternoon and he observed helicopters flying overhead, but the pilots were unable to spot the Helio in the heavy foliage. Don never mentioned if he had the means, or ever attempted to signal SAR aircraft. With weather improving, the same scenario occurred on the sixth. That night Bird and Son pilot, Dutch Brongersma, flew overhead looking for a campfire. Romes could hear the plane, but nothing was sufficiently dry to start a fire.

On the morning of the seventh, the weather continued to improve. Leaving DeCaro, who could not move from the crash site because of severe burns to his face and arms, Don elected to search the area for help. Not far from the wreck, he discovered and followed an animal trail through dense underbrush. After two hours, he encountered a cornfield with a four-hut hamlet nearby. Fortunately, an old man and woman lived there at the time, guarding and tending the seasonal crops. Gesturing toward the mountaintop, Don presented the man a note estimating his position along with DeCaro's sterling silver cigarette lighter as an incentive for him to seek help. By early afternoon, the elderly Meo arrived at Sam Tong and hailed Thongsar, who took the note to Pop.

During the conversation with Author Bill Leary years later, Don indicated that maintenance discovered the fuel pump drive shaft had failed, indicating a possible engine failure. However, because an engine failure was not mentioned at the time and the incident immediately hushed up, I always believed that in attempting to return to Sam Tong, Romes flew up a blind ravine and simultaneously ran out of airspace, airspeed, altitude, and ideas.

At a later time, Romes was invited to Sam Tong for a Meo celebration. All imbibed local rice wine to excess. A sad



Captains Mike Marshall, Author, Bill Cook, Elmer Munsell, and Mrs. Meo momma at a very wet Sam Tong about the time of the Romes SAR. To rear is the airstrip, a Black Tai village and northern ridgeline inundated by low clouds.

Marshall Collection circa July 1963.

looking group of campers emerged from the warehouse the following morning.^{8 9}

With the excitement of Romes' rescue relegated to old business, Punz and I went back to work hauling seed rice and consumables to refugee sites throughout the local area. We never dwelled on our accomplishments, and this policy set the standard for future SAR efforts. There was just too much other work to do. Therefore, after we accomplished a mission we went back to performing more mundane tasks.

As new crews filtered into Sam Tong, toward late afternoon, operations recalled Hotel-15 for a scheduled maintenance inspection. Munsell, along with Flight Mechanic Lacsina, accompanied me to "home plate."

⁸ William Leary 1963 Notes.
Author Telephone Interview with Bill Leary, 09/08/90.
Elmer Munsell Statement-no date.
Mike LaDue, Email, 02/23/20.

⁹ Christmas morning 1973, after being "captured" at the house by three exuberant Flight Mechanics and hauled off to carol and drink, I ended up at the Bonesses house wearing only my PJs and a maroon half robe. Romes was there. Recalling the Helio incident that had become just a blur on weary memories that consisted of many incidents, as a testament to my good work that day, Don enthusiastically planted a wet kiss on my right cheek. The gesture was embarrassing, but represented the only kudo I received for my participation in the operation.

The day after Howard Estes replaced me at Sam Tong, while investigating reports of ground fire from "friendly" Meo villages north Ban Na, Howard was again wounded. Trolling at a very low level, he observed an old man on a footpath pointing what looked like a "cane" at the helicopter. Then, with a puff of smoke, the "cane" holder discharged a highly accurate Meo flintlock rifle. The projectile, a roller bearing shaped round, entered the open cockpit window and pierced Howard's lap belt, slightly burning his right side.

When Ed Reid heard about the incident, he flew to the offending village and had his Flight Mechanic shoot at the houses. We had no more trouble from that area. ¹

People joked that Howard failed to dodge the bullet that day and his reputation began to emerge as our program's sole "magnet ass." He admitted privately to me that, like Joe Blifstick in the Lil Abner comic strip, he had a black cloud hanging over his head. Scoffing at first, I had to admit this could be true when he divulged experiencing seventeen engine failures while serving in the U.S. Army. It seemed like an inordinately high number, considering that even though my squadron did not fly much at New River, in an entire year, we suffered only two power plant failures.

Howard's incident reinforced our awareness that the magnesium clad H-34 afforded no protection in the cockpit from

¹ EW Knight Email. 06/22/00.
Bill Leary 1963 Notes, UTD.

ground fire. Except for the enormous metal engine hanging in the front, the helicopter was not armored. Recalling conversation about Andy Glutting's narrow miss in the fall of 1961, some of us were concerned about incurring an emasculating bullet to our private parts. Consequently, we half-jokingly talked about placing a thick Sears and Roebuck catalogue in the sheet metal seat pan recess. Howard even considered hiring a local shop to manufacture a quarter-inch steel plate equipped with a handle to place in the void. Seemingly a good idea, he finally rejected the plan, as being yet another heavy item to lug upcountry.

Equally concerned about tender genitals, Flight Mechanics placed heavy toolboxes under their bucket seats next to the cabin door. To my knowledge, such precautions never deflected a round, but probably gave the men a sense of security.

Howard's slight zapping constituted a minor concern compared to an incident in Udorn that potentially created a problem and far more anxiety. The family had moved once again, this time to the opposite side of town into a raised Thai-style house located in an area deemed safe. A sturdy picket fence surrounded the yard's perimeter and a Thai guard was hired to enforce nightly protection. Hoping to ward off and discourage robbery attempts, Howard provided the sentinel with an authentic looking weapon, a pellet pistol he purchased through the Sears mail order catalogue. (The theory being such a gun would satisfy Air America regulations.) As in the case at our original house, numerous samlor drivers with their machines congregated in front of his residence. Reinforced by Deanie, Howard was still spooked by quemoy's, and the memory of the nighttime event at Singwa's house. Consequently, one night the inevitable occurred. During a scare, the guard discharged the air gun six times. During scuffling, a wooden slat in the neighbor's adjoining fence broke. Because of the noise and damage, the irate neighbor filed

a complaint with the local magistrate, which caused Estes to explain his position to officers at the police station. No penalty arose from the incident, but for five days, it constituted another dent in the lives we were leading at the time.

To escape frustrations of life in Udorn, Howard and the family treated themselves to a week of civilization in Hong Kong. While there, he purchased a tape recorder, which he allowed me to use to good advantage. Recalling our trials and tribulations, Howard and I created a joint tape to send to Jim Spillis in Miami. Jim reciprocated with a tape indicating that he was allowed to re-enter the U.S. Naval Reserve Program without losing seniority. Upon returning from his Air America tour, the Navy required an officer at Jacksonville, Florida, to head the Naval Reserve Training program, so he contracted for four months active duty. While there, he met Ed Sobowsty through mutual friends, and kidded with him about the King's picture shooting incident.

Upon return from Hong Kong, Howard purchased a rickety old Jeep, seemingly a costly luxury, for we had not been Captains long enough to accumulate much money. As a single man trying to create a stake for the future, I considered that perhaps spending beyond one's means was a curse of married life.

CAESAR

Before leaving Air America to pursue his dream of becoming a lawyer by apprenticing and reading law, Don Wright left Howard his beautiful eight-month-old German Shepherd, Caesar. While still developing as a three-month-old pup, a maid had accidentally dropped him, resulting in a broken hind leg. It never properly set, and Don's overly zealous maids carried, coddled, and badly spoiled the animal. Caesar's forepaws were

enormous, perhaps malformed, but foretold substantial growth. Despite being able to walk fairly well, Caesar proved too much for the Estes family to handle, so I became the proud owner of the gray Alsatian. Like love at first sight, we immediately bonded.

A LADY IN THE HOUSE

Along with Dan Gardner's beautiful Siamese cat, acquired when Sang moved in to "help" with the house, cook my meals when asked, and provide comfort in my bed, my menagerie grew. Soon all my basic human needs of hunger, thirst, and sex were amply satisfied. "Thai dessert" became an essential part of my routine before upcountry RONS, because the true nature of the job connoted substantial risk. It presented an unknown quantity of returning safely and ever again enjoying sex. Some employees referred to similar arrangements with young ladies, as involving a "temporary wife." A few of these situations succeeded handsomely, and over time resulted in lasting marriages; others failed miserably. However, at the cost of seventy-five dollars a month (inclusive of food), it appeared a roaring bargain, one intended to steer me out of trouble, care for the animals, and watch over my few personal effects while I was upcountry. I had never lived with any woman before, but found the transition effortless. As we bonded, I slowly introduced Sang to society, and she became accepted among my small circle of friends. She even gained a little respectability and status. Deanie, most likely confusing the urchins, instructed Scotty and Patti to call us Uncle Dick and Aunt Sang (instead of Aunt Fairy). We generally remained home at night. However, occasionally riding in the Estes' open-air Jeep, on some nights we attended movies and functions at the Air America compound.

Although difficult to assess Asian ages, Sang appeared young. Possessing a lovely body, she also displayed a pretty face accentuated by a toothy white smile that contrasted with her very dark skin. Eager to please, never demanding, she was a pleasant person and we managed to converse in her awful Pidgin English and my poor Thai. As mentioned, her only dowry was Dan's unnamed male cat. I always considered the Siamese one of the toughest of all breeds until I pitted the animal against a gecko lizard one day. The large version of the green reptile, often reaching more than a foot in length, proliferated in our area. There was a good reason for this: no predators. Although occasionally seen during the day, at night the censored version of their mating cries were the loudest and most annoying. The carnivorous gecko ingested cockroaches, rats, and other delicacies. It was reputed to possess death grip jaws after latching onto its prey--or a human stupid enough to fool with them. I guess Cat instinctively knew this, for when I placed him in an aggressive position on the front porch and encouraged him to do combat with the monster, he wisely scampered away.

The cat was impossible to control. At night, an almost invisible white ball of fur could be seen streaking around the neighborhood doing whatever male cats do. Sometimes he failed to return for days, and then, when we gave up hope of ever seeing him again, he limped home displaying wounds garnered from tangling with equally fierce suitors. Eventually, he failed to return.

From the beginning, Caesar consumed a considerable amount of food and grew quickly. He ate well at this time, particularly when I fed him discarded T-bone steaks and bones scrounged from the STARCOM mess. He usually ate a kilo of meat per day mixed with rice and a raw chicken or duck egg. To strengthen his bones, I also shared my powdered milk with him. Fresh meat was

not expensive at the morning market, costing about forty cents a kilogram (2.2 pounds). First Sang La, then Sang, or I, when transportation was available, performed the early morning shopping. Located in the center of town, the large concrete market building, open on all sides, drew many flies. Vietnamese vendors, predominately women, conducted business. Lacking refrigeration, the meat section was particularly nasty with animal juices draining everywhere. Perhaps hacked into unrecognizable pieces the previous night, to allay a rotten odor, the "butcher" rolled the tough water buffalo or ox meat in garlic sauce. After inquiring in my best Thai as to the price, and selecting a choice cut, the item was packaged in a banana leaf and tied neatly with a rattan strip. Then I placed the object in a small yellow plastic basket and slipped it over the motorbike handlebars. The method was crude, but effective.

One day Sang and I took Caesar in a samlor to obtain a rabies vaccination from Jarun, the town veterinarian. However, since he was away tending village pigs, his assistant, Pro Ma, said that no medicine was currently available--perhaps the following month.

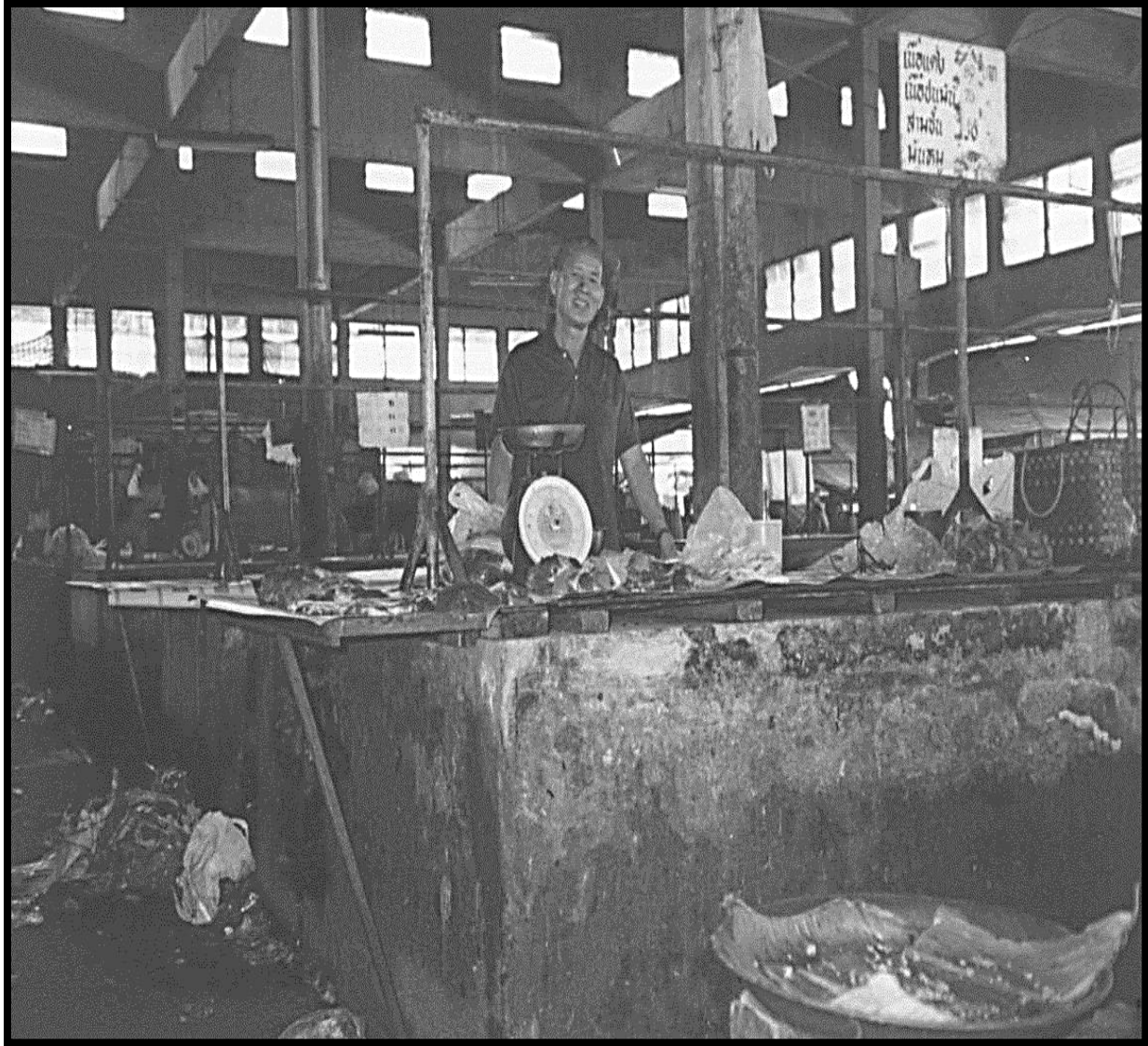
SANG LA

Sang La had worked at Sopa Villa for eight months. Although poor as a church mouse, I particularly liked her honesty, and her work ethic was acceptable for my simple needs. Despite a language problem between us, she was Fairy-trained, and I continued to learn a word here and there to aid in our brief conversations. I had a feeling that she could not believe the amount of money I spent on the dog's food, especially since her monthly wages were only the customary 300 baht. With my permission, after she brought her three, five, and nine-year-old



Mid-1990 photo of the Udorn morning market. Built in 1961, except for surrounding paved streets and upgraded vehicles, years later, the area was little changed.

Author Collection.



Inside the rear section of the Udorn morning market. At the time of this picture, Vietnamese still operated the market. Here sixty-two-year-old Tawae Khitsangna sells fresh meat from a raised concrete platform.

Author Collection.

children to the house during the day, in some ways it seemed like I had a family. I did provide some fringe benefits. Not happy seeing children with yellow and green nasal discharges I helped pay family doctor bills--she was also frequently sick. It was not all altruistic, for I did not want to contract whatever malady they had.

Originally from the Chiang Mai area, Sang La moved to Roi Et, well to the east of Udorn after marrying. Common with many poor and migrant workers, her husband drove trucks for a living. According to her, he lost his provincial identification card. This prevented him from obtaining a valid driver's license within his current province, and, as a result, he was experiencing trouble obtaining work. He had already been in jail twice for driving without a license. His plight was sort of a Catch-22 scenario. According to Sang La, he was currently in Chiang Mai attempting to obtain a copy of his family paper that attested to his prior residence. This would provide proof of original identification, so he could establish an ID in Roi Et. If true, it seemed like the process involved a lot of red tape and quite possibly bribes. He had been absent from his family a long time, and they suffered from the loss of wages. It seemed a sad, unlikely story, and I pegged him for a stupid, shiftless loser. Perhaps she was better off without him.

It bothered me that Sang La's older son was not attending school. Therefore, when Marvin arrived for the monthly rent, I asked him if his father could help place the youngster. Soon he was enrolled in a local school and I advanced the hundred-baht per month samlor transportation cost.

Now with Sang on board, I wondered at the interaction between the two women, and the long-term impact on our lives.

While the rains fell, days merged, and the lack of work caused me to lose track of time. The Bangkok papers did not

provide comprehensive news, so it became difficult to learn what was occurring in the world. Information concerning hostilities in Southeast Asia generally came from borrowed *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines. However, ever since an American history professor at Duke began assigning zeros for the day to anyone in the class who referred to these publications, I took the articles at face value. (Some football players did it just to bait him.) Occasionally, a stray *Barron's* or *Wall Street Journal* shed light on subjects.

With just four to five operational helicopters in our inventory, and the continued H-34 program in doubt, more people left Udorn, and our roster diminished to twenty-three active pilots. Even allowing for STO, vacation, and sickness, we continued to be overstaffed, and the CPH office projected monthly individual flight times of less than thirty hours. Indeed, during the Romes SAR, I returned from Laos with only twenty-two hours, and, if lucky, might fly one more day that month. One pilot, Jerry Souders, had attempted to leave two months previously, but discovered that he lacked sufficient accrued employment for tickets home and other travel benefits. Therefore, Jerry was cooling his heels at the Estes residence waiting to leave until early August.

For pilots going home, there were tax implications to consider. Lacking eighteen-month residence outside the States, one might lose his 20,000-dollar exemption and be subject to considerable back taxes. As few had satisfied the tax code's bona fide residence requirement, even individuals journeying to CONUS on back-to-back STO had to be cautious not to violate the IRS tax law. Some considered entering the U.S. through Canada to avoid a port of embarkation like New York or Seattle. I was not ready to leave, and planned to bank as many dollars as possible within the eighteen-month period.

HELIO TRAINING

To deal with excess personnel and knit our society even closer, Taipei management briefly toyed with the idea of transitioning some of us former Marines to the Helio Courier for the purpose of ferrying supplies to river towns along the Mekong. We had all transitioned through small planes at Pensacola before helicopters, but many of us had not touched a plane since training. Not convinced that it would be a good career move, I did not commit to the idea, as at my age, I believed it was not the time for such a change. Moreover, compared with helicopters, I never enjoyed flying airplanes.

Sam Jordan, Dick Crafts, and Wayne Knight opted for the Helio and actually began training. Sam flew ten hours with Lee Mullins, Jim Ryan, and Paul Severson, but failed to perform very well. Crafts trained a little, but Air America pilots had never cross-trained in different programs before. Therefore, deemed as unrealistic, before long management scrubbed the program. However, two years later Crafts did request, and Taipei management granted him, a transfer to the Helio program. Knight trained a little with Jim Rhyne. When VPFO Rousselot visited the facility during his frequent Southeast Asian forays, Wayne discussed the possibility of a permanent program change. He later received a note from the VPFO. The message stated in part:

"...we are unable to favorably entertain your request for transfer from the helicopter program to the Helio Courier program until such time as we can properly determine that we have adequate helicopter pilots assigned to the helicopter program to satisfy authorized helicopter pilot roster strength level, and that your services can be declared as being surplus to the helicopter program."

Any change hinged on the individual participant's ability to perform, and on the requirement for additional Helio pilots.

Stating that he would keep Wayne in mind, Rouss advised that he proceed to obtain the required CCAA pilot license.²

² Robert Rousselot Note 63-1067 to Wayne Knight, 08/07/63.

On the 17th, a tragic airplane accident in northwestern Military Region One occurred, affecting certain helicopter crewmembers. While attempting to drop rice during foggy conditions to a position near Pak Tha, located at the confluence of the Nam Tha and Mekong Rivers downriver from Ban Houei Sai, C-46, B-148 crashed into a mountain. Missing clearing the mountain top by only fifty feet, the plane split apart and burned, killing all crewmembers on board: Gerald Prudhome, Gideon Newton, George Newton, George Verdon, Aubrey Wooten, Narong Tantilohaukul, and Charuk Milindre.

With the investigation conducted by Vientiane representatives, several helicopter pilots participated in the distasteful multi-day recovery process. Bill Zeitler, flying with Jack Connor, assisted retrieving bodies. While in the left seat monitoring low clouds, Bill helped Jack pick his way into the wreck. Bill noted PIC George Verdon's badly burned body hanging in a tree. ¹

When Wayne Knight arrived a day afterward, he considered it the worst, messiest wreck he had ever seen. Some roasted bodies were draped in the trees and the rice load was well cooked.

Ed Reid recovered a few bloodied and black corpses. The operation bothered him considerably. He returned to Udorn heartsick and refused to fly any mission like that ever again. Unfortunately, the incident occurred when Ed's life had already begun to change for the worst. Unable to reconcile serious

¹ Bill Zeitler Interview, 09/01/01.

family problems, his wife Ginger and the children had returned to the U.S., and the couple was in the process of obtaining a divorce.

Experiencing mental anguish, Ed requested time off and even considered quitting Air America. Concerned, Ab became involved and arranged a commercial flight for him to Taipei. However, terrified of flying, Ed refused to board the first scheduled trip. Before attempting a second trip, his escort, Billy P, got him drunk and poured him into the cabin section. After arriving at the head shed, Rousselot took Ed under his wing and arranged to have C-46 pilot, Benjy Lim, fly him around Taiwan Island several times. Within a month, Ed recovered his equilibrium, and giving Rousselot credit for saving him and his job, was ready to fly again. During the period, Abadie also counseled and attempted to help Reid. The matter was never discussed again.

Before leaving for Udorn, he and Billy P conducted a trip to a Peyto pleasure palace in the hills overlooking Taipei intending to get their "ashes hauled." Billy later talked about Ed's experiences with hot baths and swinging baskets. He reported that Ed displayed a broad smile for several days following their visit. ²

² Mike Marshall Emails, 09/06/99, 09/11/99, 09/18/99.
Bill Zeitler Interview, 09/01/01.
EW Knight Email, 06/10/00, 06/11/00.
Nick Burke Interview, 09/15/97.
CJ Abadie Email, 06/21/02.

As a high time pilot with twenty-two hours, on the 24th I ferried Hotel-15 to Sam Tong with Jack Connor and Ben Naval, who would crew the ship. It was my final day on the flight schedule that month. On the way, we stopped at Vientiane for fuel and passengers. I had been issued base pass number 873, required for exit or reentry to Wattay Airport, but I did not use it that day. The document, stamped 15 July, erroneously stating my function as a Senior First Officer, had obviously been printed long before. We considered the identification card a nuisance created by politicians to harass Air America personnel, and perhaps gain additional tax revenue. Additionally, Air America was anathema to government leftists, and even moderates were becoming sensitive to us quasi-usurpers carrying commissary goods across the Mekong River tax free.

The helicopter was swapped at Site-20 with Hotel-13, after which Mike Marshall logged time with me to Udorn.

THE SAGA OF JOHN GEORGE

John George's machinations finally caught up with him, and he departed the Company rather suddenly. However, it was not his poor flying ability, or the rubber checks that one would have thought ultimately caused him to leave, but the threat of jail or termination with prejudice by irate Indian tailors.

John, an accomplished con man and infamous gambler, was involved with racehorses at the track northwest of town. He won frequently, gaining a reputation of employing the most efficient doper in the entire area. ¹

¹ Racetrack: Used mainly on weekends, we often flew over the track on the way north.



Required Wattay Airport employee pass.
Author Collection.

Horse racing failed to provide enough excitement for John, so, conspiring with several Indian moneymen who provided the yeoman's share of funds for the enterprise, the suave Virginian established a casino on the second floor of a local bank. To preclude competition, overt gambling was not permitted in Thailand. Therefore, it was necessary to bribe local police to look the other way.

Several Air America personnel visited the establishment. However, before long, something went seriously wrong at the casino. Depending on the story one heard, shortly after opening, Jerry Souders, winning large sums, almost broke the bank. Another account stated that George had paid off the wrong officials, and the business was about to be closed. Whatever the reason, one-night George cleaned out the safe and fled Southeast Asia. ²

Annoying Ben Moore, the Indian merchants soon arrived at the Air America compound looking for their partner and their money. Since the perpetrator had departed and the business was a gross conflict of interest, they had no claim against the Company. We all considered the episode extremely amusing. For the first time, people who we considered astute money-grubbing "rag heads," had been stiffed by a better, and were tripped up in their greedy quest for profit. Especially Weitz, who had his torn check taped together and processed through a stateside bank.

When departing, George also left his Thai "wife" Dang. After being "married," the unscrupulous man presented the lady

² Dick Elder's mailed reply to Author's Questions.
Dick Elder Phone conversation, 01/29/99.

with a huge diamond ring, which she proudly displayed, but later proved to be nothing but a worthless hunk of glass. ³

George soon dropped from the list of bar conversation items until the fall. At that time, while walking between the Club and Operations building, Marshall approached and handed me a short clipping from a San Francisco newspaper. Like a bad penny, George had reared his ugly head once again. This time he reputedly robbed a savings and loan company. Intercepted and apprehended running down the street, tugging at his shirt as if to pull out a gun, the idiot, perhaps reveling in self-flagellation, shouted that his name was Ben Morse. You can imagine how the wags rolled this information over, but Ben just grinned when called Mister Morse. Except for Abadie's comment about not certain John's real name actually was George, assuming the penalty for bank robbery was twenty years, that was the last time I heard any reference to the man.

THE THAT PHOM

While previously working in Bangkok, I had my hair cut locally. I wore my hair longer then; the crew cut came later. This tended to wean me from the Air America facility barbershop, where waits could be long and the haircut marginal. With the barbershop and supermarket moving to the garden area adjacent to the supply building to provide for more Club expansion (completed in October), I decided to patronize a local barber. Long before, Fairy had attempted to coax me into experiencing the five baht cut, but, feeling intimidated and impaired by my poor Thai, I always refused.

³ At the time, crewmembers took advantage of naive girls, providing them with less valuable large yellow diamonds or stones of doubtful worth or quality.



Local corner barber shop.
Jarina Collection.

As observed from the B-bus, while en route to the airfield, it seemed that any vendor who owned a stool could establish a business under a tree and ply his trade for three baht per patron. But, the open air "shop" was mostly reserved for less affluent samlor drivers and children. Middle class Thai men patronized indoor shops cooled somewhat by whirling ceiling fans. For a foreigner, there was no problem conveying what you desired, as you certainly were not there for a beer. Pointing, pantomiming, and grunting proved sufficient until I learned a bit more Thai, and "*that phom crup*" was not that difficult to verbalize.

While thumbing through dog-eared Thai magazines, I covertly observed the action taking place in the chair. Following a haircut and shampoo (five baht extra), the barber produced a goose neck lamp and various instruments. Curious, I speculated if the proprietor was emulating early western barbers who, in the absence of doctors or dentists, performed minor operations. No such chance. It involved ear cleaning.

The process was fascinating, and I soon had the opportunity to experience it firsthand. After peering into my ear and commenting "*sok ga pok*" (dirty), flourishing tweezers, the barber, began to peel away a layer of allegedly dead skin. Ouch. During continued probes and the peel, it felt like he was ripping out live skin. The deeper and nearer to my eardrum he worked, the more nervous I became. Then satisfied with that aspect, he attacked me with a fluff-brush, attached to a small stick, which he happily twirled in my ear canal and against my eardrum. Thus experienced, during the "cleaning" of the second ear, I attempted to hold my head steady to prevent an accidental slip of the hand resulting in a ruptured eardrum. The procedure was not pleasurable, and I was relieved when completed. Although asked on every visit, I declined future ear cleanings.

Preceding the ear torture "operation," I had the simple haircut. The barber generally cut ones' hair the way he wanted and all the options were his. I decided to splurge and accept a shampoo. I found this phase of the experience invigorating and a little sensuous. With the chair swiveled around and lowered over the sink, the little guy used water from a flexible hose to wet my hair. Then shaking soap particles from a small packet, he massaged these into my hair and scalp. A plastic scrubber with needle-like points was vigorously employed over my entire head. This was pleasurable until I could feel epidermis peeling from my scalp. After a thorough rinsing, the entire process was repeated. Magically, no blood coursed down my ears. A blower was produced for drying. From haircut to shampoo to ear cleaning, barber man performed the entire process expertly and efficiently.

Just when I thought he was finished, Joe the barber prepared for the coup de grace. From behind, I heard a clip-clop while he clapped his hands together and flopped his fingers against the rear of my head and neck to relax tense muscles (I recalled this procedure from Okinawa haircuts). Then, seemingly satisfied, he tilted my neck laterally and quickly snapped my neck. That felt good, but so violent that reflecting on it later alarmed me. Indeed, while discussing this with other pilots, I learned that paralysis and permanent damage could result in the neck snap. Therefore, in the future I accepted a clip-clop, but declined the snap. I could imagine what the barber thought when I refused both the ear clean and neck snap--probably 'crazy farang.' Oh well, most farangs looked like buffaloes anyway.

Later, I learned that for an additional five to ten baht, one could obtain a soothing upper or full body massage with a hand vibrator. This relaxing practice easily induced sleep during a sultry afternoon. The shops never attained the septic,

sanitary look of a stateside barbershop, but the proprietor always accomplished the job with a minimum of fuss, and after I established what I considered safe procedures, it became an enjoyable way to spend a couple hours and only cost twenty baht. Invariably, I regretted leaving the establishment and returning to the hot, dusty street.

Since signing of the Lao Geneva Accords in 1962, U.S. aerial reconnaissance was still in abeyance within Lao territory. Therefore, ground intelligence concerning PL/NVA movements along the eastern Panhandle trails was gathered by several hundred ethnic Kha tribals, some still training in Savannakhet and Pakse camps. They indicated, despite the rains, an increasing enemy presence in the Tchepone area and a threat to Attopeu. The information motivated President Kennedy to authorize selected Phase-2 portions of the Lao program. Some of these provisions were tailored to encourage FAR and FAN forces with RLAF T-28 in support to attack selected enemy targets. Also planned was expanded tribal intelligence capability and increased enemy base sabotage in northern Laos. However, all these goals would take time to implement. ⁴

⁴ Jacob Van Staaveren, 16, in Reference to NSA Memorandum 256, 07/30/63.

Despite a requirement for additional helicopters in Laos, JUSMAG Thailand work began again in Bangkok. While considering the dislocations, disgruntled pilots complained about transportation from Udorn and trips into the congested city. In addition, the lack of hotel space, meals, taxis, and delayed returns to Udorn bothered many.

On Thursday, 1 August, Operations scheduled me for the first hardship tour of about a month in Bangkok. The assignment came as no surprise, for as a bachelor and the outfit's junior Captain, I expected unpopular jobs. Elmer Munsell (also a junior Captain) and I took Hotel-13 for a test flight, but it did not meet airworthiness specifications and we spent another night at home.

The next day we reached Don Muang (Sierra-09) safely in Hotel-14. After checking in with Air America Operations and enduring a frustrating ride into the city, I stayed at the 447 Guest House again and renewed my friendship with the wise Myna bird.

HUA HIN

JUSMAG requirements had not changed appreciably and my first mission entailed a weekend RON to Hua Hin, halfway down the western peninsula. I only took one passenger, an Army major.¹

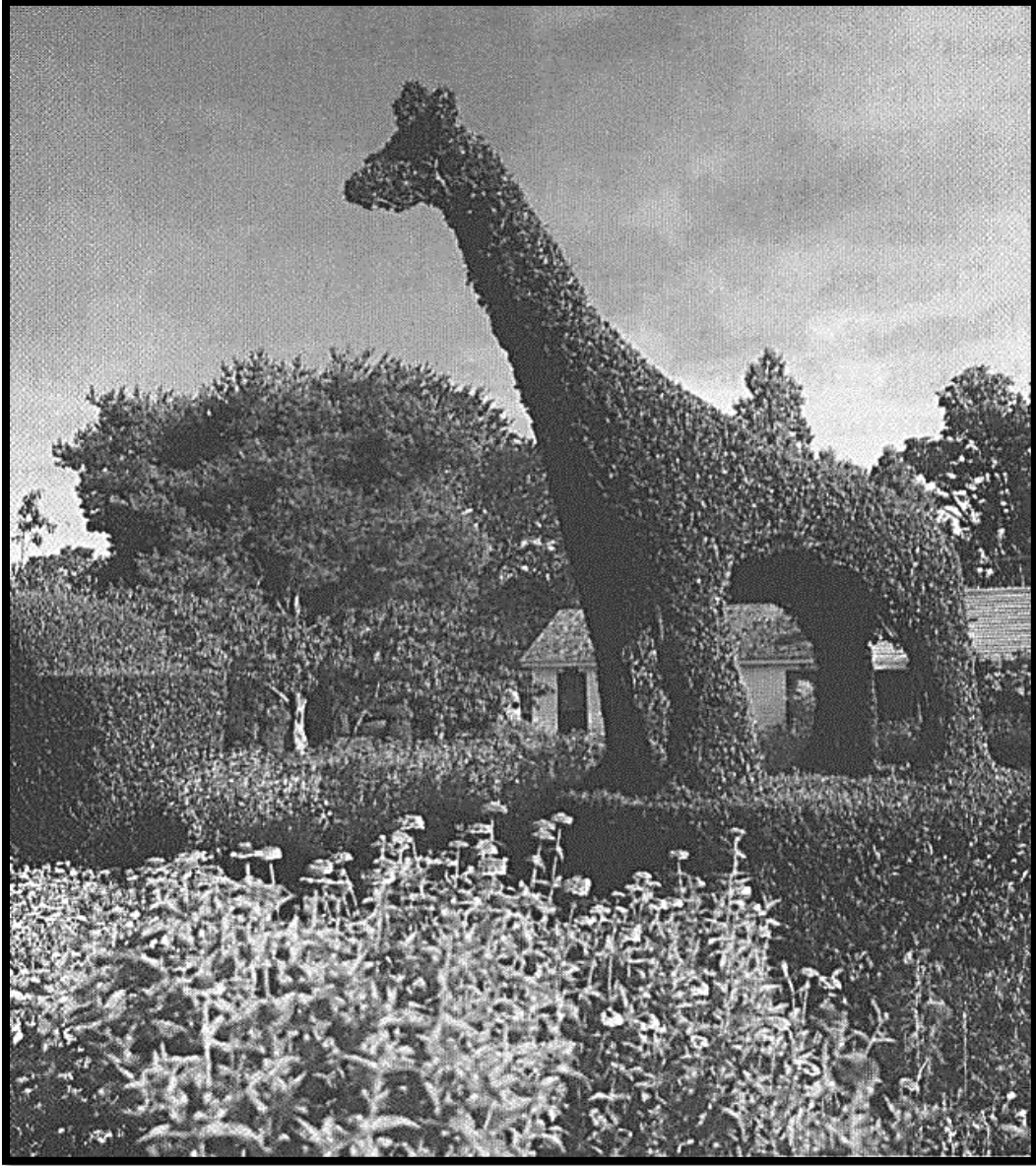
Hua Hin, formerly a quiet fishing village, became Thailand's foremost seaside resort, catering to the royalty, the

¹ If available to us, we logged some Thai sites by Sierra code numbers (later Tango), i.e. S-09, Bangkok; S-10, Hua Hin. Others not generally known were logged by name.

rich, and the famous since the 1920s. During an area flyby, we passed former King Prajadhipok's small summer palace along the shoreline.

I billeted at the green wooden government Railway Hotel, sleeping in a tiny room under a mosquito net. The place seemed rustic and primitive for such a highly touted resort. The outside landscaping overlooking the Gulf of Siam was more inspiring. Ornamental topiary bushes depicting various animals and Thai legend adorned the lawn. As an art procedure seated in ancient history, the gardener encouraged box bushes to grow around shaped mesh or wire to emulate the desired form.

Although there was a Special Forces camp there, I did not know what business the major conducted, if any, only that he played golf at the resort's fine course. (At that time, I had no knowledge of the PARU or Thai Special Forces presence there.) Not golf players, Ben Naval and I were left to our own designs. I had flown with Naval several times and considered him a competent, conscientious Flight Mechanic who, speaking intelligible English, represented the modern generation Filipino. The majority of his generation were well educated and former Filipino Air Force personnel. As we walked around the local area observing the small town's busy commerce, I became better acquainted with Ben. Besides being the most handsome and smooth skinned Filipino I ever knew, he possessed a great personality. During the course of our conversations, I asked him why Operation Brotherhood clinics and hospitals in Laos were staffed exclusively with Filipino doctors and nurses. He replied that jobs were scarce in his country for educated professional people, and this obligated them to seek offshore employment. A fact of life, the revelation pointed out a sad reality prevalent in many third world countries.



Representative topiary art.
Author Collection.

Since I did not golf, the major totally avoided me. Therefore, I spent part of Sunday walking and wading along the rocky beach. I did not have a bathing suit, but the waves breaking violently on the shore and against the vertical, phallic shaped rocks would have dissuaded me from such activity. Whether the heat, season, inaccessibility, or Pattaya competition kept them away, I saw few people on the beach or in the hotel during our three-day stay.

After a little more sightseeing from the air, probably reported as an area recon to justify the trip, we returned to Bangkok.

CHIANG MAI

For six days, I did little but stand by at the airport terminal or at a hotel located on the wide grassy median between the military and civilian runways. I did manage to scrounge a number of 1:250,000 maps of Thailand and Laos from a friendly Thai tower operator. The rest of the working day I spent studying an accounting textbook fixed wing driver "Wild" Bill Donovan had lent me before the trip. I regretted never having taken a business course at Duke, and believed the information contained in Donovan's book might be useful someday.

Even though not really suited for the cockpit, the maps acquired from the tower operator proved valuable on a three-day RON to the north starting on the 12th. The JUSMAG commanding officer, a full bird colonel, was being relieved and shortly rotating to CONUS. The tall leader revealed that he had scheduled the trip to search for wild peach trees in the Pua district and determine if a sufficient number were actually there and accessible to generate a commercial market. To me, the assignment sounded suspicious--more like another golf, tiger hunt junket, and a wild goose chase than a tangible mission.

Still, the north was the only portion of Thailand I had not visited and would generally round out my geographic education of the country. I jokingly thought that after the completion of this trip, I might be qualified to write the great Thai travelogue--at least from an aviator's viewpoint.

While planning the trip, I wondered if enough fuel was available for the hundreds of miles we had to cover. That would be a TBA (to be announced). Early in the morning, with the colonel sitting in the left seat to "help" with navigation, we soared north past Ayutthaya and Lop Buri on the way to Phitsanulok (S-01). Once past the familiar sites, the terrain became confusing with unending north-south flowing rivers and merging jungle, which all looked identical and required me to traverse them using time distance navigation.

The topography of the mountainous region consisted of a continuation of the Himalayan range through the east of Assam, India, Yunnan Province, and the Burmese Shan States. A series of parallel and longitudinally folded mountain arcs extended further south through the Thai peninsula and into Malaysia. Over eons, sedimentary strata fractured lengthwise in several areas, allowing magma under pressure to form two long granite ranges. Between mountain ridges relatively flat valleys formed. In the basins, four major river tributaries, the Mae Ping, the Mae Wang, the Mae Yon, and the Mae Nong flowed south to feed the Mae Nam Chao Phya on its way to the sea. The four rivers passed through narrow gorges before leaving the northern valleys for the central plains. Over eons, alluvial soil washed downhill by annual monsoon runoff from mountain streams, creating enormous amounts of sediment and a series of alluvial debris at mountain bases. In addition, orographic lifting over northern mountains, creating heavy rainfall and continued flooding, broadened to fan

size segments that eventually merged to form hundreds of miles of continuous piedmont plain on both sides of the major rivers.

The rich soils laid down over millennia proved fertile enough for tribal units and the first settlers from China to survive and create a flourishing civilization. The earth produced rice, vegetables, tobacco, and fruit trees bearing lychee, lumai, and oranges. Large provincial centers like Phrae and Lampang developed along the riverbanks.

After more than three hours, we landed at the Phitsanulok laterite strip. While we refueled, the colonel disappeared in a Jeep, I supposed to visit the area Special Forces camp. Then we flew on to Lampang, where the district leader treated us to lunch and guided us to Pua. There a pow-wow commenced with town fathers at the remote location about how best to proceed on the wild peach hunt. Another guide was provided, and the people wanted to start immediately. However, it was already afternoon and, like many naive Customers, everyone including the colonel thought the H-34 contained an inexhaustible fuel supply. When I asked about H-34 fuel availability, I learned there was none, not even a lower grade normally stored at provincial police stations for emergency purposes. Aware that our final destination was Chiang Mai, I recommended that we fly there to arrange for fuel, and I would figure out something.

Chiang Mai lay in a high valley surrounded by mountains, and was reputed to be much cooler than Bangkok. However, in August that was a moot point. At opposite ends of the country, the city was accessible by a 469-mile overnight railroad trip from Bangkok. Indeed, I used the tracks to partially aid navigation. Many months ago, I heard that the light-skinned women of the province were reputed to be the most beautiful in all of Thailand.

Common to many cities at the time, we landed on the grass strip west of town. Lacking even a decent terminal, the airport was unimpressive for such a large provincial capital.² Thai Airways only flew into Chiang Mai twice a week, so nothing better was required. While the colonel departed with a wave, a Customer in civilian clothes arrived and I explained my projected fuel needs. He did not have an excess in stock, but enough to fuel the helicopter and a couple extra drums to pre-position half way to Pua.

I deposited the two fuel drums in the jungle near the base of a prominent towering landmark, hoping they would still be there the following day, and then returned to Chiang Mai just before dark. After eight hours in the air, a record for a JUSMAAG mission, I spied the Doi Setep temple complex west of town. Soaring 3,500 feet above the valley floor, the mountain housed Wat Phra Dhat Doisetar, an elaborate Buddhist temple built in 1383.

From the confines of my dingy room, I could hear raucous music from the local bistro calling me. However, after long hours in the cockpit and the strain of navigating through unfamiliar area, even the lumpy mattress failed to keep me awake and I soon succumbed to the wiles of the "Z" monster.

The life of the line helicopter pilot was destined to be one involving pre-flights, refueling, planning, flying, and waiting. Therefore, I arose early expecting another full day. However, after arriving at the airport, I waited hours for the good colonel to appear. In the meantime, Thai Airways landed.

² I did not take into consideration Udorn Airport's strategic location and potential use as a B-52 emergency landing site for USG assets. Therefore, the hard strip spoiled me and I expected similar landing sites to be the same.

Two ground handlers wheeled steps to the front cabin door, and a few passengers debarked.

Late that morning, the colonel arrived in a covered Army truck. The contents shocked me and the true purpose of the trip was revealed. It certainly did not include hunting peaches at Pua. He was loaded down with various woodcarvings and other high quality, expensive gifts that represented the region's best handicrafts. This last hurrah obviously constituted a buying trip for the man, and from the number of items stacked in the cabin section, I surmised he was also accommodating all his friends. One large piece characterized a heavy teak elephant, one I had seen in gift shops along New Road. In addition to my careless mouth, I have a very expressive face and I am sure the colonel read my irritation, for he uttered some remark to assuage what he saw. Merely "Peter Pilot," it was not my place to chide a passenger, especially such a powerful commanding officer, but I made a mental note to pass information of this flagrant use of a helicopter for a personal buying trip on to my superiors. At that time, I reconfirmed my wise choice to separate myself from the U.S. military.

As planned, flying by the fuel stash to verify its continued presence, we returned to Pua, retrieved the "guide," and headed for the reputed peach tree region. I explained that time on station would necessarily be minimal, as even counting the two drums in the jungle, our fuel would barely allow us to fly to Lampang and Phitsanulok. Besides, after recognizing the colonel's buying ploy, I had little interest in this contrived mission, and doubted that he did either.

During our twenty minutes on station, we spotted only a handful of trees growing on slopes, displaying distinctive pink peach blossoms. In addition, there were no roads or trails in the area connecting it to civilization. Probably for my benefit,

the colonel feigned surprise and displeasure, and as there were no landing places, he agreed to curtail further searching. Consequently, we returned to Pua and discharged the confused guide--after my shooting incident at Phu Kabo, I was leery of these so-called guides. We then retraced our flight path to the fuel cache. As the stash was located in the middle of nowhere, and with the afternoon waning, the colonel and the district official evidenced a little nervousness while Ben and I pumped the precious liquid into the tanks. Aside from a few snakes and perhaps a wondering tiger, I wondered what they feared. As it was too late to push on to Phitsanulok, after the colonel secured his goods, we RON'd at Lampang.

The next morning, following a fuel stop at Phitsanulok, we returned to Bangkok. I was happy to rid myself of a person I considered the great deceiver. The trip was not a complete waste of time, for as a relatively new pilot flying solo, it afforded me the opportunity to practice navigation over unfamiliar and long stretches of terrain with questionable maps, interface with Thai people, and gain experience with fuel conservation. It was the last time I visited Chiang Mai or the north of Thailand for many years.

A few days later, operations canceled the remainder of my month in the barrel.³ After cashing a check at the Johnson Ma moneychanger across the street from the Company office, I returned to Udorn.

³ In the barrel: A term that connotes a less than pleasant experience. Beside a lewd schoolboy joke regarding a person's experience inside a barrel, the Author had a barrel experience as a tyke. There was a closet in a hall outside my room containing a sizeable laundry barrel. One night my Father appeared at the opened door to find me standing inside the barrel with my eyes wide open. It remained a mystery how I managed to climb into the container, and there was little or no explanation for the occurrence other than somnambulism-noctambulism or sleepwalking. It never happened again.

Along on a rare fact-finding trip with other managers from Taipei, including Walker Gilmer, the Assistant Managing Director with whom I had corresponded when soliciting a job with Air America. Abadie happened to be in the office when I arrived. I informed him of my thoughts regarding the two worthless JUSMAG trips. Although he listened patiently, I could tell that he was relatively unimpressed, and no complaints would ever be lodged with JUSMAG. I never heard anything more regarding the subject, and it was the last time I worked in Bangkok during 1963.

While I still worked in the Chiang Mai area, there was considerable excitement in Udorn Town. About 0330 hours on the 14th, a fire erupted in the center of Udorn. Quickly raging out of control through old wooden shops and buildings, the conflagration potentially threatened the entire town. Therefore, various town officials contacted Ben Moore and requested Air America's assistance. Our Filipino fire department people drove equipment to the scene. However, access close to the blaze proved difficult because of congestion caused by owners or looters blocking the streets with trucks being filled with goods from threatened stores. The situation improved when they were physically removed.¹

Fortunately, there was no wind to fan the blaze. Consequently, teams of Air America fire department personnel and Thai army explosive experts contained the fire, created firebreaks, and largely extinguished it by 0730 hours. By that time, an entire city block had been destroyed.

Naturally, aside from an accident, there was some speculation as to how such a dangerous fire began. One theory I heard involved subversive elements. With so many former North Vietnamese living in town and Thai leaders supporting the West in the Lao situation and South Vietnam, the entire northeast area was very touchy. More likely, relating to an age-old custom of clearing the books by the end of the year, Chinese business owners sometimes torched their shops to obtain insurance money. As the shops were packed tightly together and fires so dangerous in their wake of destruction and deaths, the government frowned

¹ Ben Moore August 1963 Monthly Report.

on the practice by executing those found guilty. At times, a scapegoat was publicly terminated as an example to those tempted to clear the slate by fire.

I was happy to return home to my adopted people and animal. Soon after returning, I took Caesar to a friend's house to "play" with a female Shepherd. The dogs were getting along well until Caesar decided to cavort with the Cocker Spaniel next door. It was a bad thing to do. The jealous bitch not only bit him with vigor, she chomped the identical leg that had been broken when he was a pup. When the leg began to swell, Sang and I took him to Doctor of Veterinarian Medicine Jarun's clinic and the hospital for an ex-ray. No break was evident, but his patella appeared out of place. As a precaution, and to immobilize the affected area, the vet molded a cast over the affected area. I removed the cast several days later and the leg looked much better.

Jarun finally received a supply of rabies vaccine, so after borrowing Billy P's Vespa, I took the dog for the injection. While putt putting to the house, the high-spirited animal decided he wanted to chase a water buffalo in a field adjacent to the main road. When he jumped out, I ran over him. There was minimal injury and within a short time, the tough animal was back on his feet.

While in Bangkok, I had attempted to obtain a crankshaft for my disabled motorbike. None were available, so I solicited the local Honda dealer for the manufacturer's Japanese address. Shortly afterward, I wrote a semi-sarcastic letter to the company depicting the effort and difficulty others and I had expended trying to obtain a nonexistent part. Much to my amazement, within a short time, I received a courteous letter from the company stating that they would contact and forward the correct part to the Bangkok dealership. My hopes soared that in

the not-too-distant future I might once again be riding my own machine.

ELDER TAKES THE HELM

When Rusty Phillips and his buxom wife departed Air America intending to return to Pan American Airways, Ben Moore tapped Dick Elder as de facto Club Manager. ²

Not wanting to lose his line pilot status, Dick refused Moore's offer of a full-time job. As long as flight time continued at low ebb, Dick agreed to continue helping procure groceries and booze from Vientiane and Bangkok and act as Club Manager at base salary until Ben hired a regular manager. Elder held the job for a year and a half. Sharing duties, Jack Connor agreed to fill in for him while he was scheduled upcountry. At some time, Ben sponsored a contest for a Club name and Club Rendezvous won the honors--hereafter referred to as the Club. ³

Ben needed all the assistance he could muster. Since opening for business, the Club had become a nightmare to manage and operate, far too popular and too heavily patronized. Besides Company personnel, everyone in the area wanted membership: Thai officials, AB-1 Customers, missionaries, and military advisors were but a few. The overload forced Ben to choose and cull candidates, and he certainly made plenty of enemies during the selection process. To facilitate increased numbers of people,

² After recall to the airline, for some reason, Rusty surprisingly quit Pan American. Phil Perry, a member of the Airline Pilots Union, was instrumental in convincing Phillips to retire in lieu of resigning, so he would receive retirement benefits. Jim Spillis Interview, 02/09/97.

³ Dick Elder Tape, 08/31/88.
Dick Elder Email, 01/27/99.

the board of directors voted to expand the dining room by eliminating the existing bar and moving it to the front porch.

By the following month, plans went forward to Taipei proposing to enclose and air condition that area to house a new and improved watering hole. There was little money left in the budget for other than construction materials, and previous experiences with local contractors had been less than desirable, Therefore, Jack Connor, the group's experienced carpenter, along with other pilots, volunteered to tackle the job. Not handy with tools, thinking I would merely get in the way, I did not volunteer. Besides, as rumors still circulated widely regarding a Company name change or contract termination because of negative political harassment in Vientiane, the job failed to seem secure enough to expend a lot of work for a facility we might soon abandon. Others with families were not enamored with the proposed building program either. Despite excessive time off, they considered the project too much work. Some opted out, recalling dislikes or distrusts engendered by episodes in the recent past, and the many disparate personalities involved in such a project. As part of the overall scheme for the compound, before actual work began on the new bar, Jack and Dick created preliminary draft drawings for a school.

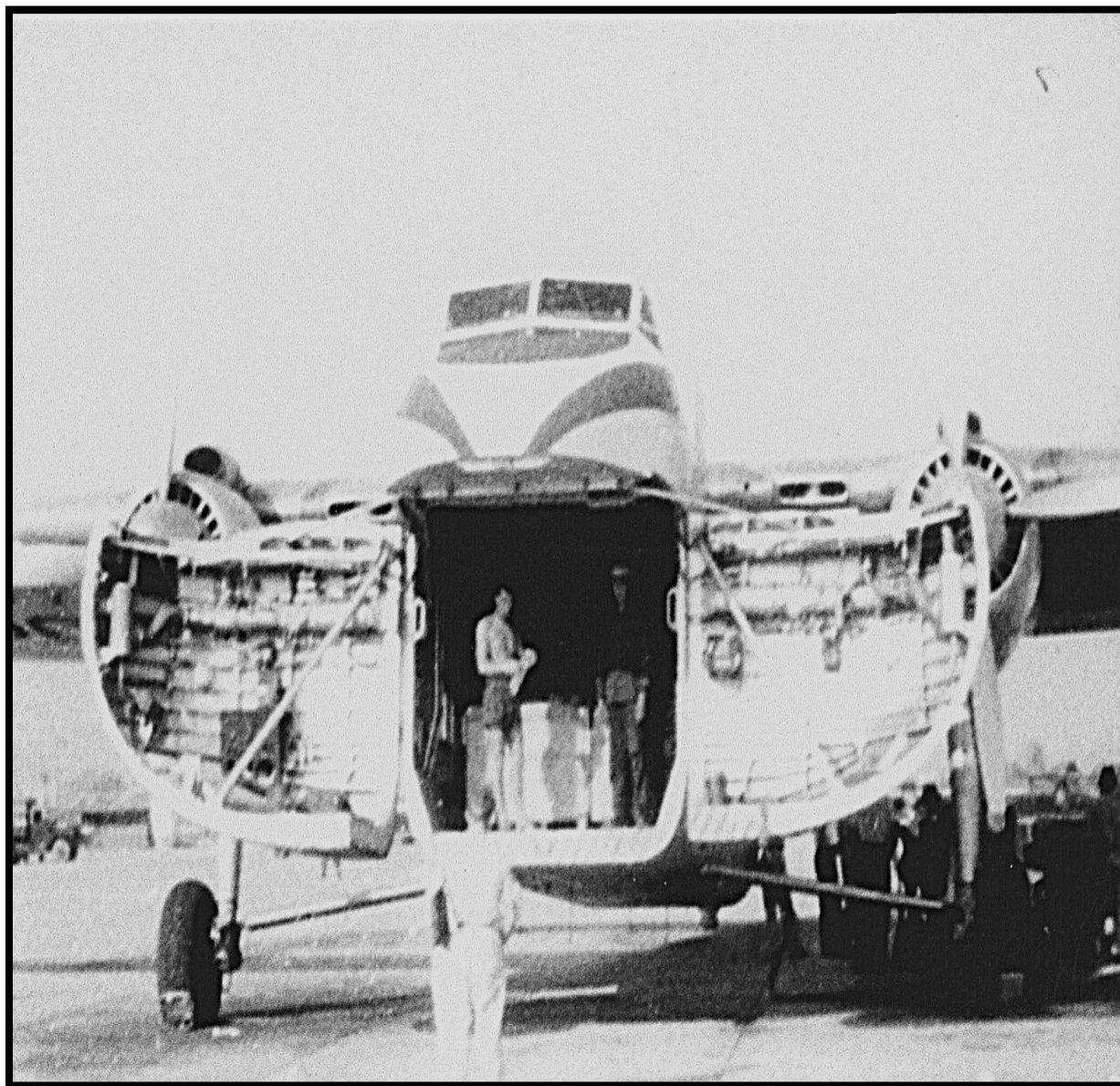
While retrieving JUSMAG movies to show in the Club's back room, Elder met the American commanding officer and the helicopter advisor, Captain Jim Amalong, both detachment advisors assigned to the Thai army camp adjacent to our compound. Jim, the leader of three other pilots (former White Star trooper, Ted Untalan, who we called "Pineapple" from his Hawaiian heritage, was in the group), arrived half way through the year. The movies arrived sporadically through the military circuit on the New Zealand Bristol mail plane. After first cycling through all military commands in the country, and

STARCOM in Udorn, if there was no further demand, they came to us.

After the problem incurred earlier with Ben Moore, I suspected someone in the organization was definitely not my friend--I had a couple of souls in mind--and to avoid further unpleasantness and grist for the mill, I withdrew to fortress Sopa Villa. Aware of the problem, Dick Elder attempted to draw me out of my semi-reclusive state. At some point, he invited me to slip through a tear in the rusty fence lining the access road to meet the U.S. Army advisors. I found them very affable, sharing beer, conversation, and even an occasional movie at their assigned house.

One day, I met Colonel Groggen and Major Piselli at the Thai Army compound. Learning the men were visiting Army Special Forces personnel, as customary, I asked them if they knew my cousin Chaplain Robert T. Anderson. Yes, they knew him from earlier Fort Bragg days. They were just a few in a long line of individuals who admired Bob's good work with the troops while in cadre or in the field. In such a sterile environment, it was reassuring to meet people who shared common ties with someone you knew and trusted.

The Thai army compound featured a cracked asphalt tennis court enclosed by a high fence. Athletic from an early age, Thai men enjoyed soccer (called football) and the more sophisticated types played tennis. From the court's deteriorating condition, I deduced that in better days, a high-ranking Thai officer had ordered the court built, then moved on or retired. Amalong, a large former athlete, enjoyed the sport and frequently played with Elder. Relishing a chance for healthy exercise, I generally watched and engaged the winner. As Jim invited us to take advantage of the court anytime, Elder offered to purchase me



The versatile New Zealand Bristol plane displayed a unique front-end loading capability. The aircraft delivered mail and other items to USAF bases throughout Thailand.

Mac Thompson Collection.

a racquet on his next buying trip to the Bangkok commissary. I often played with the duo after that, and during the games noted a distinct flaw in Big Jim's character. A poor loser, he displayed an extremely bad temper. In addition to cursing fluently, the blond captain vigorously heaved his racquet against the fence following a bad shot--and there were many. A non-English-speaking Thai private, who looked not much older than a boy, was assigned as Jim's batman to shag balls. Beside Jim's abuse of the young man, I knew that anger was not well received in the culture. Therefore, highly embarrassed, I withdrew a bit from Amalong's presence.

THE POOL

Almost simultaneously with the new bar project, akin to military recruits digging holes and then filling them, Elder, in conjunction with others, proposed another make-work project: building a swimming pool between the Club and Operations. At Ben's behest, facility construction engineer, Bill Lee, a towering Chinese originally from Mainland China, sketched plans for a sixty-five-foot long, 50,000-gallon pool. Jack Parks, in charge of Facilities Management, collaborated with Lee to engineer the pool and its filtration system. Jack, an Australian, had worked with the Company since the early CAT China days. His Udorn duties extended to operation of the water treatment plant and supervision of never-ending base construction. Jack, well known and liked by all, always remarked in passing, "*What's up, mate?*" Lacking adequate financing to begin the project, Moore envisioned bartering fence posts with a local contractor, but rejected this when he discovered the man's company lacked necessary excavation machinery. Therefore, Elder searched for alternatives.

From his days in college, Amalong knew the commanding officer of the Seabee outfit building the runway and a few basic buildings for the nearly completed air base west of Nakhon Phanom (NKP). Therefore, to ascertain what the unit might have to trade or provide for the pool, especially construction equipment, Elder and Amalong caught a ride to NKP with Helio Courier pilot, Jerry Solberg. They were supposed to return to Udorn the same day. However, Solberg's mission took him to southern Laos, and on the return flight, there was only room for Jim. Despite his entreaties, Udorn operations would not dispatch an aircraft to NKP and Dick was stuck at the site for three days with only the clothes he wore. During the period, Dick, who had experience with earth moving equipment, worked in the heat and humidity driving the heavy machines. He got to know the Seabees well and made many friends. With a handshake, he struck an oral agreement that if personnel in the unit helped with the pool, he would supply them with Club booze obtained from the Vientiane commissary. ⁴

The relationship paid off handsomely for us in equipment, supplies, and labor. Assigned to Udorn Airport work, the Seabees sent graders and, in conjunction with smoothing out the combination laterite taxiway-parking ramp, they removed concrete from the volleyball-tennis court area in preparation for the pool dig.

The tennis court was no great loss, for it was never employed for its intended purpose. However, many volleyball games took place there. Even Abadie participated. Jungle rules were the vogue, which allowed over top of the net slamming and

⁴ Dick later sent fifty cases of beer, a case of scotch, and other items to the men.

Dick Elder Tape, 08/31/88.

Dick Elder Email, 01/27/99.

net contact. The net's top strand, reinforced with three-quarter inch steel cable, caused bad cases of cable rash. Other injuries occurred from stepping into perimeter water pit drains. ⁵

The energetic activity appeared exceptionally rough to me, and the men participating too large, so I merely watched. Eventually, as extreme heat interceded, the novelty wore off, and the games were abandoned.

The agreement also worked out well for the Seabees, for after repairing the former Marine D-4 Caterpillar tractor discarded and rusting at the end of the taxiway, they used the machine to good advantage. After completing that task, Air America traded the D-4 to the civilian Navy officer in charge of airport construction. He used it for three months in exchange for free cement from a portable batching plant erected to provide construction material for airfield improvements. Bartering assets helped achieve goals in those early days, and booze allotments were certainly also instrumental in achieving goals.

NIGHT FLYING

On the 26th, as one of my final scheduled flights during the month, Operations scheduled Elder and me a night flying session. During the normal course of upcountry work, we rarely flew at night and were only authorized to log post sunset time during late returns to Udorn. For obvious reasons, the no night restriction was mandated to clear mountains in our single engine helicopter by actual dark. Therefore, some flights occurred during the twenty-to-thirty-minute period called twilight--a not quite light and not quite transition between sunset and actual

⁵ EW Knight Emails, 06/03/00, 03/10/01, 03/14/01.

darkness. Since we were paid a small amount for night flying, it became a legal license to steal a few pennies.

Encouraged by headquarters Taipei, night flying was strictly envisioned as a training exercise to maintain a comfort level and a modicum of proficiency to aid in an emergency situation. However, because of other pressing requirements, the training was actually scheduled on a catch-as-catch-can basis every three months, and only when crews and helicopters were available. Conducted with two pilots in the cockpit, each pilot generally attempted to conduct three night landing circuits and one ADF approach within the allotted one-hour period. Until management wised up, we began logging time at sunset, so the first pilot to fly enjoyed last light before the curtain dropped over the stage.

Flying at night around the local area sometimes assumed a surreal quality and became somewhat stimulating. One evening an animated Jim Coble hustled in from the flight line and proceeded to amuse those of us still present in the compound with the basics of a wild-eyed tale about seeing an unidentified flying object (UFO). Totally out of character for the normally quiet individual, the agitated manager proceeded to expound about encountering and chasing a strange object. Naturally, we were interested, for newspapers and pulp magazines of the day widely reported UFO sightings throughout the Cold War-agitated world.

Shortly after dark, while flying racetrack circuits around the field during a slow time engine change break in, Jim observed in the distance a saucer shaped object flying southwest of the airport toward the first ridgeline of the Phu Phan foothills. He estimated the object's dimensions thirty to forty feet in diameter with a line of illuminated windows along the side. Departing the slow time pattern, Jim headed toward the



A view to the north from a UH-34D over the Royal Thai Army base of the Air America facility, parking ramp, concrete batching plant, and runway excavation.

Abadie Collection.



UD-34Ds parked in line-abreast on the Air America Udorn Air Force base flight line at dusk.

Mike Marshall Collection.

mysterious object and made several passes attempting to close on it, but each time the entity moved away, or made erratic direction changes. He chased the UFO for what seemed like an eternity until it disappeared toward the ground behind a tree line. Although some who heard the story were skeptical, it tended to make a monotonous evening a little more interesting among men who craved excitement.

Unknown to me, Jim independently resolved the mystery, but, consistent with a closed mouthed management technique, failed to pass the info on to us troops, particularly me. The day after his encounter, still convinced that he had witnessed a bona fide UFO sighting, Jim observed next-door children playing with and test flying a rice paper and charcoal hot air balloon. Perhaps related to some religious holiday, the two-foot toy, consisting of a metal tray brimming with glowing charcoal, generated sufficient hot gasses to lift the attached balloon into the air. He theorized that from a distance, slant angle range, and a distorted vantage point, the toy appeared highly magnified. While attempting to close on the "UFO", Jim's rotor wash caused the device to gyrate wildly. ⁶

⁶ Jim Coble Email, 02/09/02.

Consistent with the Kennedy Administration's June strategy to achieve some military parity in Laos, the Vientiane U.S. Embassy Country Team proposed goals for limited wet season FAR and FAN offensives throughout the country. These were calculated to disrupt enemy plans, but not incite massive counter reactions. Taking a pragmatic approach in Military Region Two, the policy envisioned slowly expanding paramilitary activity, first in Xieng Khouang Province and then moving north into Sam Neua. Therefore, along with Vang Pao's approval, Agency case officers began reconstituting human and hard assets by upgrading Meo capability to contain enemy advances on the Plain of Jars and other areas of the province. While C-46 and C-47 aircraft dropped approximately forty tons of USAID supplies per day throughout the country, STOL Caribous delivered "hard rice," the euphemism for ammunition and other weapons of war, to Xieng Khouang Province sites at the main base at Long Tieng (VS-20A), Moung Cha (VS-113) southeast of Pha Khao, and Houei Sa An (VS-23) on Route-6 east of Bouam Long.

SUCCESSFUL ROAD INTERDICTION

Taking advantage of relative enemy inactivity during the rainy season, with Washington's sanction and Air America support, CIA Case Officers and Vang Pao initiated classic guerrilla warfare in Military Region Two. During early August, in a principal action, Meo units, using a myriad of friendly mountain villages as bases, conducted an impressive road cutting operation along eastern Route-7 in the Nong Het district, an area that native son, Vang Pao, knew very well.

After crossing the North Vietnamese border at Barthelemy Pass near vehicle marshaling areas at Moung Sen, unimproved

Route-7 wound and twisted along mountain contours more than twenty-five miles through harsh terrain until reaching the Ban Ban Valley's lower levels. Hacked from sheer mountainsides, the dirt road consisted of numerous hairpin turns and other potential chokepoints ideal for ground or air interdiction. In addition, with the seasonal monsoon in full bloom, which traditionally restricted enemy vehicular traffic, Meo units and their PARU advisors were afforded an ideal opportunity to select lucrative targets and conduct hit and run tactics.

Largely road bound, Pathet Lao and Vietnamese forces were normally reluctant to sweep hostile mountain terrain during the rainy season, particularly for such an elusive and dangerous enemy. Therefore, for some time, Meo road watch and harassing teams operated with relative impunity from high sites like Phou Nong (Site-71), located in the hills relatively close to the road's southern perimeter.

Planning by Vang Pao, Tony Poe, and Bill Lair for the third Route-7 cratering operation began in July. Far more ambitious than previous successful interdictions, it required authorization from the embassy and State Department.

The plan envisioned destroying two portions of the road. The first, a diversion, would be conducted west of Ban Ban and was calculated to collapse a cliff onto the road. The other more ambitious operation located fairly close to the border would implant 240 shaped charges in a long section of road.¹ Because of the proximity of a Pathet Lao company, and possible Vietnamese reaction time, Meo troops would have to move onto and hold this area for an estimated twelve hours. In order to

¹ Shaped Charge: An explosive device designed to exact maximum pressure in one direction. In this case to blow a substantial hole in the roadbed.

provide the time necessary to prepare and set the charges, two ADC battalions would protect the east and west flanks.

Air support to move men and drop supplies was essential to the operation's success, but seasonal adverse weather during the final days of July caused delays. Vang Pao was also forced to reposition men and supplies at a more accessible base camp located farther from the eastern target area.

With all pieces of the puzzle in place, on 6 August, the offensive operation kicked off on two fronts. However, there were reservations about its success among rear echelon types.

At the westernmost objective, Thai PARU teams employed recoilless rifles to discourage the enemy company from preventing the demolitions teams' access to their work.

As planned, the resulting explosions dropped the cliff onto the road. Other charges produced deep holes in hundred-foot sections of the roadbed.

To the east, 1,000 guerrillas successfully occupied the proposed target area. Enemy attempts to counter the movement were repulsed by PARU-Meo teams utilizing 82mm, "four deuce," heavy crew-served mortars. Consequently, with the enemy threat reduced to negligible levels, instead of twelve hours deemed necessary to accomplish the task, the force was granted five days to work. During the extended period, troops dug a 1,000-foot trench line ten feet deep. Into this, twelve SGU platoons placed numerous explosive charges. From after action reports and both ground and airborne photos, the coordinated operation appeared successful. The cratering charges and tamped explosives² created a "heave effect" dislodging a one-kilometer portion of the road and blowing entire sections down steep hillsides, while

² Tamped charges: Explosive charges placed in holes and covered with dirt.

covering the remainder with rockslides. All this was accomplished with only one KIA and three MIAs.

Tony Poe, Long Tieng's intrepid warrior and communist hater, participated in the road cutting operation. He closely supervised PARU explosive experts Thwatchai and Ophat positioning and planting shaped charges at critical points that were calculated to inflict maximum damage to the artery. He also participated in the all-important heavy weapons covering fire.

Aided by signal panels and Tony's ground-air briefings, Bird and Son pilot Eric Shilling flew a twin engine Scottish-manufactured triple tailed Pioneer along designated drop zones.³ Then from low level and working in rain, kickers Don Courtney and Mike Lynch accurately parachuted bundles of demolition charges to waiting teams. Loading at Long Tieng, the crew conducted six trips over a two-day period. Awareness that they had participated in damaging the enemy's main logistic route to the PDJ, elated and provided amusement for the crew.

Despite the considerable damage caused by the brilliantly conducted operation, within three months enemy engineers had repaired most of the roadbed and rolling stock again moved west out of North Vietnam. However, Western advisors calculated that enemy dry season offensives may have been slightly impeded, although as during previous years, anticipating the rainy season and an impassable road, the enemy had pre-positioned many supplies forward. Hence overall planning was not overly hampered. However, unable to tolerate additional supply line disruptions, the interdiction soon prompted a strong retaliation

³ The Pioneer reminded kicker Don Courtney of the Montana smokejumpers' Ford Tri-Motor plane. Don found Shilling a delight to work with. Years later, he read a history of Claire Chennault's Flying Tigers, American Volunteer Group (AVG) and discovered Eric's name among the pilot roster. He also discovered a note that alluded to the fact that Shilling had proposed painting the shark's mouth on the nose of the P-40 planes.

against Meo hard sites overlooking the enemy lines of communication.

Supporting the interdictions aftermath and replenishing critical supplies, to challenge an enemy offensive certain to be soon launched, on 16 August Wayne Knight flew more than ten hours shuttling personnel and supplies into Phou Nong.

Enemy response to Meo success after the substantial interdiction was swift and deadly, resulting in thirty-six encounters along the road during the first two weeks in September. Enemy casualties were high, but the engagements also cost Meo irreplaceable men, and they were slowly pushed away from Route-7. However, despite the conflict, resilient Meo guerrillas retained much of the area east of Xieng Khouang Ville and south of Route-7. ⁴

In an often-repeated pattern, during the rainy season we positioned guerrillas in areas not owned by anyone except those who physically occupied them at the time. Generally, within walking distance of an objective, we supplied and retrieved the men if required.

With helicopter support now readily available for Vang Pao's men to bounce from hilltop to hilltop, the rainy season provided a valuable opportunity for guerrilla operations deep

⁴ Segment Sources:

Douglas Blaufarb, *Organizing and Managing Unconventional War in Laos, 1962-1970* (Rand, Jan 1972) 34.

Douglas Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era* (New York, The Free Press, 1977) 157.

Former Case Officer Terry Burke, Email to Author's 02/23/04 inquiries.

Ken Conboy, 100, FN 47, 104.

Arthur Dommen-Leary.

Don Courtney Email 10/23/05, account included in his draft of *Going to See the Lao Elephant*.

Thomas Ahern, Chapter Nine, 168, 172-174, 176, 190.

Wayne Knight, August 1963 Flight Time Report.

EW Knight Email, 06/14/00.

into enemy "controlled" territory. At the peak of the rains, with roads and trails mired in mud, and largely impassable by standard vehicles, enemy mobility diminished to a minimum. Therefore, in addition to increased guerrilla activity along Route-7, Meo expansion was also about to commence in the Houei Sa An (Site-23) area about ten miles northeast of Bouam Long (Site-88). Located east of Route-6, adjacent to a vital enemy logistical artery flowing out of Sam Neua into the Ban Ban Valley, the mountain site afforded easy access to the supply route for interdiction purposes. It was to this site that the crew of Wayne Knight and Carl Gable ferried Tony and Vang Pao to generate enthusiasm for mine laying operations.

Wayne noted that there were still two helicopters RONing at Sam Tong, with one generally working for Pop on refugee relief missions, and the other designated for war-related tasks out of Long Tieng.

Whether coincident or not to the Route-7 road interdiction operation, enemy forces increased pressure on RLG government units in Military Region Two. Following artillery barrages, Ban Pha Tang, a strategic road position north of the FAN-controlled Plain of Jars airfield, was abandoned. Ambassador Unger, taking exception to this latest enemy provocation, decided it was time to engage the enemy with stronger measures, mainly airpower, when supporting ground units in recapturing Pha Tang. Influencing Unger's thinking, Secretary of State Rusk had previously issued T-28 guidelines to address and penalize communist attacks. Rockets, machineguns, bombs, and napalm would be used when authorized. Since use of napalm would constitute a fresh addition to Lao weaponry, and was highly controversial in world opinion, after more consideration, for the time being, employing napalm was rejected except in only the most egregious situations. Further influencing this decision, Lao pilots had

not been taught how to safely and efficiently deliver napalm and, recently trained in the T-28, most men were considered unpredictable as to their ability to perform in actual combat conditions. ⁵

DOCTOR CHARLES L. WELDON

Accustomed to working in far-flung places, Doctor Weldon, a native of Louisiana, and his wife, Doctor Patricia McCreedy, after following a stint in American Samoa, elected to apply their skills in Laos. "Jiggs", whose nickname was largely derived from the Sunday comic strip character he resembled in *Bringing Up Father*, was slated to replace the outgoing USAID chief of public health in Vientiane. At the urging of Ambassador Unger and AID Director Charlie Mann, and to obtain some flavor regarding the people and country, Weldon journeyed north to Sam Tong with Air America pilot Al Rich in a Helio Courier. Part of the trip was calculated to observe the condition of the rudimentary hospital, assess what supplies might be required, and to meet legendary figure Pop Buell. During the rollout landing, on the left side of the dirt runway he noted a long, bamboo sided building with a thatched roof. Other similarly constructed, but smaller houses were scattered throughout the small valley. As Al parked near the warehouse, Pop walked out of the building unshaven and dressed in military fatigues.

After working all day at Bouam Long, Wayne Knight, Ed Reid, and Carl Gable RON at the Sam Tong warehouse with Weldon during his first night upcountry. After a few rounds of bean poker, the crewmembers hit the sack, while the two older men continued to play cards and drink Lao Lao. Sleep was not easy that evening,

⁵ Victor Anthony, 90-91.

for before long, mind numbing booze prevented all semblance of civility and Pop issued a challenge to the Doctor. At the top of his voice, he predicted Jiggs would be like all the other bureaucratic anal sphincters and never visit Sam Tong again. With both men's judgment clouded by the effects of the mountain brewed alcohol, an intense argument ensued, but it cleared the air and marked the beginning of a strong, lasting relationship whereby the two became fast friends and jointly participated in Lao war games for many years. ⁶

Toward the middle of August, Weldon, Buell, and other dignitaries visited Hong Non (VS-86) to dedicate a new dispensary on the same site from which Wayne Knight and I had retrieved Helio parts in February. Located deep in the bowels of Sam Neua Province and enemy territory, the high Meo site served as district headquarters for the RLG civilian administration and military. Strategically important, a locus for intelligence gathering on enemy movements in the Sam Neua City area, for several years the site dodged any serious Pathet Lao attacks because of its elevation and remote location.

WALKABOUT

A former Marine Captain in World War Two, "Jiggs" received his marching orders at Hong Non. Father Lucien Bouchard, a Catholic missionary just returned from visiting surrounding villages, reported that a budding, virulent strain of endemic cholera was sweeping the area, threatening to decimate the population. Over several days, with Major Tong Vonggrassamy and his RLA partisans to guide and protect him, Jiggs and PARU assistants at the site inoculated thousands of local folks with

⁶ EW Knight Emails, 06/15/00, 02/04/63, 02/06/63.

vaccine flown in from Bangkok. Starting at Hong Non, they covered a large area to the west, including the villages of Cha Tao (later known to us as Houei Ma, Site 107) and Houei Kha Moun (Site-111). Both locations featured Helio Courier strips and drop zones in various states of disrepair, and were therefore serviced first. The refugee village of Cha Tao contained people, who were displaced months before, and were not yet able to plant and harvest a full rice crop, and were almost entirely dependent on rice deliveries to survive.

Other villages requiring strenuous walking or riding to reach were Ban Houi and Hao Moug Yut. Ban Houei Hao was located high on the slopes of Phou Houay Hao across the valley from the soaring heights of Phou Pha Thi (Site-85). Departing Hong Non on mountain ponies, the administrators struggled along the steep and difficult trail near the village of Den Din to reach their destination. In contrast to newer refugee sites he visited, these tough people had never been displaced by enemy pressure, and sturdy wooden houses spread along the hillside of the long-established Meo village. Following inoculations of all the souls they could muster, and supported with critical items air dropped by Helio Courier, the team moved on to Moug Yut.

The trip downhill to the Lao village of Moug Yut took them along narrow, overgrown paths almost hidden by triple canopy rainforest, including plants with huge leaves that shaded the sun. Nearer the village, a quiet, undisturbed forest was dotted with reasonably spaced, towering hard wood trees. However, viewed from an aircraft, well-developed bushy top structures lent the impression of a merging and densely packed forest.

Consisting of about sixty stilt houses and located on the Yut River, the small Moug Yut village lay deep in a valley at the southeast foot of Phu Pha Thi. One bank of the river contained the village, the other side rice paddies. Unlike the

cooler mountains, the warm and humid climate supported tropical coconut palm, papaya, and banana trees. When the medical work was completed, the village elder invited the AID people to lounge in the village's hot spring.

With inoculations complete, the group returned to the heights of Cha Tao, located in the foothills south of Pha Thi. From there, they returned to Sam Tong or Vientiane.⁷

⁷ Charles "Jiggs" Weldon, *Tragedy in Paradise: A Country Doctor at War in Laos* (Bangkok: Asia Books, 1999) 57, 60-63, 69.

With recently transferred T-28s staged at Savannakhet to counter increased AAA threats, under the command of Colonel Thao Ma Mahaanosith and his handful of pilots, following another upgrade training period, the RLAf began operations to the east. One plane was configured with hard points to carry six 500-pound bombs, but Ambassador Unger closely controlled issuance of fuses. The remaining planes were restricted to weapon stores of .50-caliber machine gun and rockets. After logging over fifty-two hours during inclement weather, toward the end of August Ma's pilots discovered a multi-battalion enemy camp sixteen miles west of Tchepone, where spies previously reported Soviet Ilyushin 12 and 14 cargo traffic. The hard charging Ma desperately wanted to mount an attack on these airborne and ground targets, but not desiring to make waves with Hanoi leaders, Unger, supported by State, denied authorization for attacks, except for the enemy transports. ¹

WEITZ DEPARTS

Taking advantage of the flying lull, Charlie Weitz applied for home leave at his parent's home in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His decision to return to Air America depended on an increase in helicopter availability and flight time. Charlie and other pilots' departure would shrink our dwindling ranks to seventeen line pilots and, with a projected addition of three H-34s, theoretically increase flight time and pay checks.

¹ John Pratt, *The Royal Laotian Air Force 1954-1970* (HQ PACAF Directorate Tactical CHECO Division, 1994.) 11.
Jacob Van Staaveren, 17.
Victor Anthony, 90-91.

Billy P had married a Chinese lady from Hong Kong and rented the house in Chet's compound that Duane Meyers vacated when he left Air America. Wai Ying was an excellent cook and produced some delicious Chinese cuisine for us.

Alone since Billy moved next door, and since he planned to be in the States for several months, Charlie relinquished his house to Jim Rhyne and Bob Hamblin. While waiting to leave, Charlie floated from one house to another. He bunked with Wayne while his wife Lai gave birth to their first son at the Bangkok Christian Hospital. After Lai Knight returned to Udorn, aware that I had a spare room at Sopa Villa, Charlie asked to share the house and expenses with me until the Company approved his home leave and departure date. I was playing house at the time and considered that the presence of another bachelor might infringe on, or disrupt stability in the household. *However, after partaking of his beer drinking hospitality, how could I refuse his request?* Besides, despite his blatant faults, I admired and respected Charlie.

To know and associate with Charlie was a never-ending saga of comic relief. He never lost a beat in all the years I knew him, and his legend persists today with people who knew him. During the spring of 1963, Alabama police shockingly and unjustly employed dogs to control Negro civil rights activities in Montgomery. It was not a good period for the United States of America in projecting a positive worldwide image of the land of the free and the brave. Publicity was rife with newspapers and movies displaying pictures of police dogs in action.

Red Alston, Charlie, and Billy Palmer were enjoying STO in Bangkok when race riots were occurring in America. Purely as a practical joke, Charlie hired a German shepherd and walked it into the Plaza Hotel. Then, while Palmer slept, the prankster paid a hotel staff member to open Billy's locked door. Then

Weitz introduced the dog to the room. Although he could have construed the act as a racial slur, Billy, a favorite mechanic whom we all loved and respected in our tight-knit group, and who had garnered a better education than most of us, recognized his friend's intended prank and did not appear offended. ²

On another occasion while on STO in Bangkok, during the wee morning hours, Wayne Knight bumped into Charlie in Chiquita's Tavern. As usual, Charlie was buying rounds of drinks for the house. At one point, Wayne believed he observed unscrupulous waiters stuffing receipt cups with extra chits, and he attempted to warn Charlie. However, Charlie appeared very drunk and Wayne did not think he absorbed or heeded the caution. Instead, he continued purchasing drinks for the packed house. Heeding nature's call, Wayne visited the men's room. Inside, the John door was wide open and he saw Weitz busily flushing chits down the toilet. This prompted Wayne to believe his buddy was not quite as drunk as he formally considered. ³

Charlie had a penchant for purchasing interesting new items, which added greatly to my knowledge and lifestyle. While in the glorious shopping mecca of Hong Kong he obtained an advanced Polaroid Land camera and photo paper. The device provided great enjoyment, especially with superstitious locals who believed such incomprehensible magic originated from the spirit world.

Naturally, he obtained a subscription to *Playboy Magazine* and was probably the first Air America employee to procure a key to the original Playboy Club in Chicago. He ordered the initial, and only, hard copy ever published of Ginsburg's risqué *Eros*.

² Dan Alston Interview, 09/22/99.

³ EW Knight Emails.

Among other prurient items, the book contained a photo of an interracial couple embracing, something highly frowned on during the early 1960s. By attempting to emulate *Playboy*, courts ruled that Ginsburg had violated postal smut laws, and he was jailed.

While still living at Sopa Villa, Charlie's lifestyle did not appreciably diminish, and he came and went as he pleased. Return from nightly town forays always culminated with a throttle burst and roar of the 125cc motorcycle as he parked in the "security" cage. He followed this with drunken shouts of joy and exclamations of "*Casterlin, you candy ass*" that generally awoke both of us and elicited a sleepy "*crazy man*" remark from Sang. Unless one of us was scheduled upcountry, Charlie's outbursts became a tiresome pattern. Losing patience and sleep, I was relieved when he finally departed for CONUS in October and left me again to enjoy domestic bliss.

BOB ROUSSELOT QUILTS AIR AMERICA

In September, after years of devoted service with Civil Air Transport and Air America, Bob Rousselot left the Company. For a long time, Bob and George Doole, both having strong personalities, had frequently butted heads over Company policy. However, despite Doole's animosity, the VPFO had too much stroke at Agency headquarters to be terminated. Bob loved his job, but he also desired a life devoid of frequent carping from Washington. Therefore, he had forwarded a resignation the previous year, contingent on the Company finding a suitable replacement. Nothing was accomplished for a long time, but when Doole hired Tallmadge Boyd, he wanted Bob Rousselot to immediately vacate the VPFO position. ⁴

⁴ Professor Bill Leary 1963 Notes.
CJ Abadie Email, 01/25/99.

Early in the month, to ensure an orderly transition and familiarize Boyd with the Thai and Lao bases, Rousselot, Grundy, Abadie, and Chambers visited the Udorn compound. ⁵

Everyone in our area was shocked and puzzled, as the boss had worked continuously with the Civil Air Transport and Air America organizations almost from their inception. We were informed that Bob was retiring, but hardly anyone believed that explanation, for he was just too active a guy and one who seemed to enjoy his job. Bob was likeable and to me the man seemed larger than life. Whenever he visited Udorn in the past to ferret out information about various programs and press the flesh, he made a point to be sociable, and spend time with us pilots, either collectively or individually. I did not always agree with the military regimen he attempted to impose on us, but I clearly understood why such methods were required to contain certain elements in our wild bunch.

Loose talk had Rousselot retiring to his eleven-million-dollar ranch in the southwest U.S. Naturally, that kind of money evoked speculation as to his source of funds. Widespread rumor indicated that when General Chiang departed the mainland for Taiwan, the "Old China Hands" flying out his gold and other wealth had sequestered a generous portion for themselves. Another person indicated that most of the pilots who flew in China during the early days and remained with CNAC and CAT were well off financially. Rousselot always had good jobs and was at the top of the pay scale when in management. Without the "gold," he could have easily been a millionaire. ⁶

⁵ Charles "Chuck" Chambers was Wayne Knight's former helicopter squadron commanding officer.

⁶ CJ Abadie Email, 02/19/99.

The colorful tale remained unsubstantiated, but provided great fodder for the employee rumor mill.

"Pathet Lao leader Souphannouvong has threatened in the past that any U.S. aircraft that overflowed 'his' territory would be shot down."

CIA Daily Brief, 09/06/63.

While flying missions out of Savannakhet, on 5 September, C-46, B-150 was shot down on a supply drop slated for Ban Houei Sane in the Tchepone area. Failing to bail from the plane, pilots Joseph C. Cheney and Charles G. Herrick were killed. Mixed nationality Air Freight Specialists American Eugene H. DeBruin, Thai Pisidhi Indradat, Pardit Promsuwam, Prasit Thanee, and Chinese radio operator To Yick Chiu jumped out over hostile territory and were captured.

On the evening prior to the incident, Operations Manager Tom Krohn briefed PIC Captain Cheney about viable drop zones (DZ) and problem areas in Military Region Three. He stipulated that 8,000 feet was the minimum en route altitude considered safe in suspected AAA weapon areas.

The crew began assembling early on the morning of the incident. The previous night one of the kickers, Tran Than, for personal reasons was adamant about not flying the next day. He was replaced by Prasit Thanee, whose flight had been cancelled. Radio Operator Y.C., a very superstitious individual, also expressed reservations about the flight in conversation with the PIC about the mission.

After breakfast the men boarded B-150 to conduct last minute preparations to depart Wattay Airport for Savannakhet. Several Air America personnel exited either their offices or Madam Chu's restaurant to watch Cheney start the engines. As the plane taxied toward the runway, everyone waved at each other,

with those on the ground never suspecting they would never see the aircraft intact and only one crewmember again.

About 1600 hours, the crew had completed two drops of rice and slabs of water buffalo to friendly locations when the plane was hit by 12.7mm anti-aircraft or larger caliber fire close to the border near the village of Ban Houei Sane. Vientiane Flight Watch alerted Krohn two minutes after the ship reported heavy ground fire. Base Manager Stitt and Krohn hurriedly made their way to the radio room, where they learned that an engine had caught fire and been shut down. Tom requested the position and altitude and received a garbled, *"Forty minutes out of Savannakhet, heading 300 degrees at 3000 feet, ETA...standby one."* That was the final radio transmission received from the dying bird.

An Agency report stated:

"...This would be the first U.S-chartered plane lost to enemy fire since last January. Since then, however, there have been many reports of ground fire against aircraft flying over Pathet Lao-held territory.

*The Pathet Lao repeatedly have protested these flights. They claim that such flights do not have the approval of the tripartite government and that they constitute intervention in Laotian internal affairs..."*¹

MOUNT UP BOYS

After hearing the distress call, the Vientiane station prepared to mount a massive SAR mission. However, it was too late to accomplish anything that night except alert crews and SAR teams and load one C-123 with equipment deemed necessary to accomplish the task. Halting all other work, C-123s 05X, 06X,

¹ Central Intelligence Bulletin, Daily Brief, Laos, 09/06/63.

865, and C-45 73Z were dispatched the following morning for Savannakhet to search for B-150 and crew. Helicopter pilot Captain Bob Hitchman positioned Hotel-12 from Udorn to Lima-39 and Captain Jack Connor rotated Hotel-15 from Sam Tong to Vientiane. Arrangements were made to billet crews at a loaned USAID house near the airport for however long it took to find and rescue the missing C-123 crew.

With the crews assembled, the search began in earnest. Over the next three days Vientiane-based Mike LaDue, flying with Don Campbell, Frank Janke, Bobby Herald, and others, lay on open ramps in the rear of the planes scanning terrain for the C-46.

Evidence of the crashed aircraft proved elusive for two days. Then, on the third morning, H-34 pilot Howard Estes and Flight Mechanic Bill Wilmot discovered the plane in a small rice paddy adjacent to Ban Na Seng May, five miles northwest of Moung Phine. During the process of looking for crewmembers from a low hover, Howard hit an object and had to land to inspect the tail rotor.

Ambassador Unger was notified of the sighting and gave Roy Stitt approval to allow Janke, Herald, and LaDue access to and investigate the crash scene. Since the plane was located in a denied area, to prevent being outgunned and taken prisoner, the men were briefed to avoid any firefight that could be avoided.

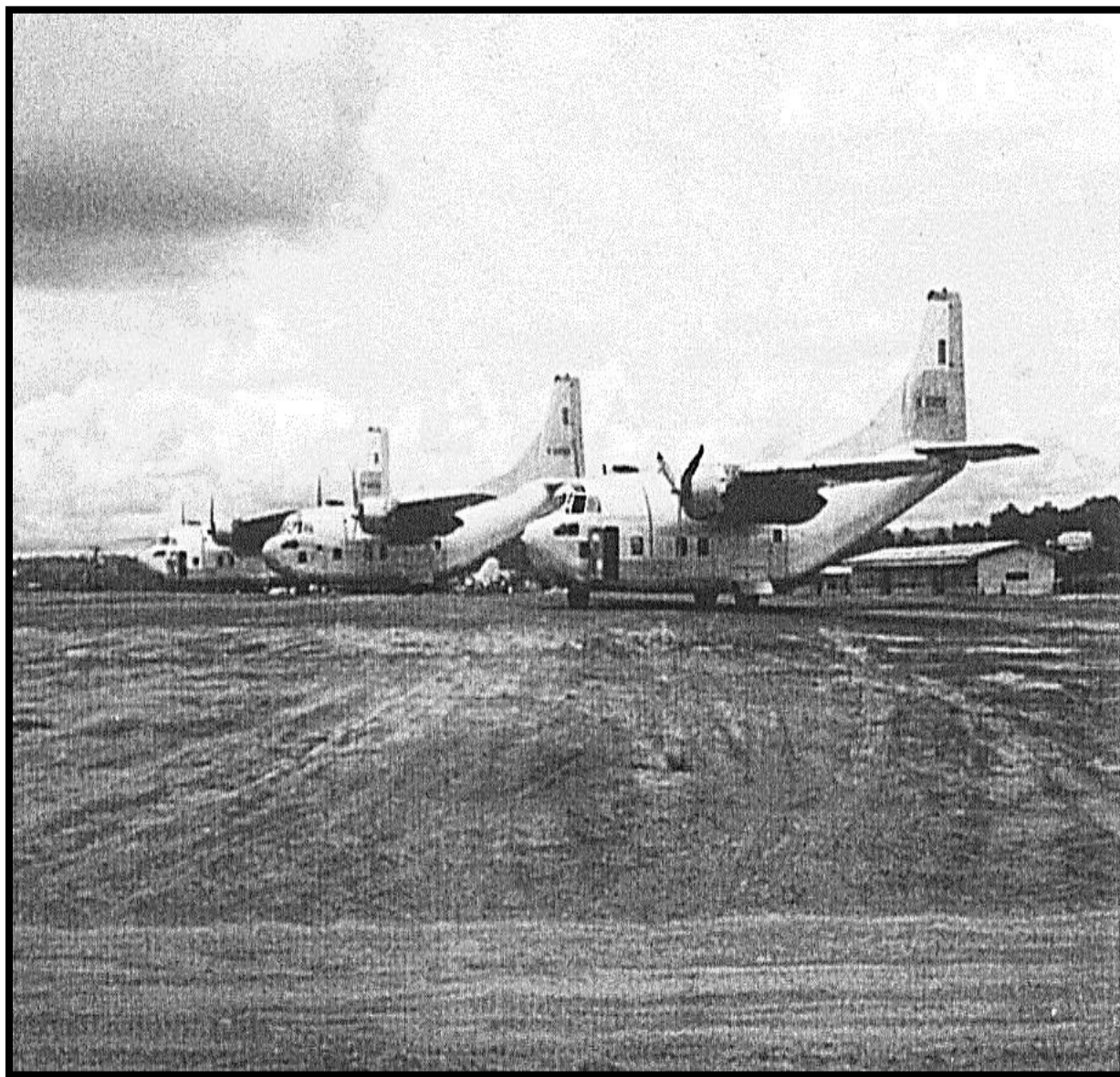
After picking up Lao soldiers at Seno forward operating base, Hitchman and Connor deposited eight troops, the investigation-recovery team, and gear one kilometer from the crash site.

Upon reaching the ship, the team ascertained that the aircraft had impacted the ground at a steep angle. Collapsing like an accordion, only six feet of tail protruded above ground.



Air America Log, Volume 5, #6, 1971. C-46 Commando parked at Wattay Airport Vientiane, Laos. The cargo aircraft was used for airdrops and air supply throughout the Lao war.

Air America Log.



The three C-123 Wattay based aircraft dispatched to Savannakhet, Laos, on 09/06/63 to search for C-46 B-150 and crew.

Mike LaDue Collection.



A few of the Air America SAR crew members and one administrator in front of the loaned USAID house at Savannakhet. Left to right: UH-34D Captain Bob Hitchman, unknown, Frank Janke (back), C-123 Captain Don Campbell, Copilot Andy Anderson, Jack Leister behind Andy, Bobby Herald, and Molingban, one of a few Filipino kickers involved in the SAR.

LaDue Collection.

Lacking correct tools--metal saws, crowbars, jacks, and other heavy-duty cutting tools--progress was slow entering the fuselage. After working an hour to gain entry, with a nasty odor of rotting buffalo meat pervading the area, Herald managed to attain only limited access, observing a patchwork of broken, twisted wood and aluminum. Then, while the frustrated team discussed the next step, breaking the silence, a poorly timed volley of gunfire erupted from seventy-five yards away, causing the Lao security force to panic and scatter.

With miserable weather enveloping the men and area, the afternoon waning, and sporadic gunfire popping around the area, the team returned to the helicopter site, where only one H-34 remained. Hitchman had continued to idle in the unsecure area, and, low on fuel, Connor elected to return to Seno for fuel. Not wanting to leave anyone in the landing zone, they explained the situation to Hitchman. Bob allowed that he also had a low fuel state, but might be able to carry all hands. After loading, he hovered to the far end of the clearing and began a takeoff. During the process, tree branches were impacted, but Hitchman managed to depart the site.

All participating aircraft returned to their respective stations in anticipation of a first light launch and resumption of the investigation. While debarking at L-39, team members learned that Ambassador Unger required an eye-witness report of the situation. Therefore, they flew back to Vientiane for a debriefing at Embassy headquarters. Unger listened patiently. After hearing the account of reported gunfire and the team's suggestion to return with additional troops and correct tools, if obtainable, Ambassador Unger, weighing the hazards of further rescue/recovery attempts, to the anguish and despair of the Air America crewmembers, terminated the operation. And, of course, as USG's representative and Field Marshall of all operations in

Laos, the ambassador's word in the kingdom was law. Although most likely the right decision, it was not well received by Air America personnel. Don Campbell was in tears and the bars were full of heavy drinkers that night. ²

Until reports filtered into Agency hands and Pathet Lao radio broadcasts divulged the capture of the five Air America crew, the fate of all the crew was largely unknown. However, the pilots were presumed missing or dead.

The incident shocked our organization and produced much soul searching on the part of Company and Customer officials, who decided that appropriate action should be undertaken to ensure that aircraft operating in Laos would not fly over known hostile areas if it could be avoided. After ample discussion for a few months, upper echelon types decided that a pilot briefing department was required to prevent further losses. The office would contain all known current intelligence on enemy dispositions. Eventually formed, the facility became known as the Flight Information Center (FIC). ³

² The following year Leonard Unger was not so reticent in committing resources for an SAR to rescue an Air America helicopter crew.

³ Howard Estes Phone Calls, 08/31/91, 05/16/92, 07/16/92, 02/16/96.
Bill Leary 1963 Notes.
Author's Interview with Pisidhi Indradat March 1995 Bangkok, Thailand.
Incident Reference: 63090505, Unit History Information for Air America Laos 09/05/63-09/09/63.
Tom Walker, History of the Flight Information Center; CIA Information Memorandum, TDCS-3561, 478, 10 October 1963.
Mike LaDue, Emails 02/22/10, 02/23/10, 03/02/10.
Feature Story on the Air America Website, Prisoner in Laos: A Story of Survival-by Pisidhi Indradat-as related in the *Smokejumpers Magazine*.

PISITH

Thai kicker, Pisidhi Indradat (spelling taken from his business card provided to the Author during a Bangkok interview), survived the ordeal. ⁴

Pisith sprang from an illustrious military heritage, which included a relative who marked the first Thai to graduate from West Point. His grandfather was the first Thai to graduate from the military academy at Sandhurst in England. His father attended Michigan State in 1941 when the Japanese rolled into Thailand. After joining the Seri (free) Thai movement, his father later walked from China to Thailand to join the Thai resistance forces. Unfortunate to be on the wrong side of the political sheets, General Pao's forces killed him during a coup.

Continuing family military tradition, Pisith joined the elite PARU at a very young age. He trained at the Narusuan camp under the auspices of Bill Lair, Jeff Cheek, Jack Shirley, and Tom Fosmire, and served nine years with the unit. During the period, he temporarily operated around the Plain of Jars under Colonel Parnet.

At the inception of the Lao operation, Air America lacked sufficient experienced kickers to help conduct airdrops in Laos. Therefore, with the Thai government's sanction, Pisith volunteered with six other PARU and remained with the Company until sufficient employees were hired to replace them. After returning to his PARU unit, he quickly realized that he could earn considerably more money working for Air America, so he took a permanent kicker job.

Mike LaDue hired, trained, and found Pisith a reliable worker. He was also aware that Pisith, a PARU, had formerly been a kicker on special assignment, and the RTG sometimes embedded

⁴ According to Pisith, the danger and extent of AAA and enemy camps throughout the area was unknown at the time.

their own people in Air America. Bill Lair knew all of this and had no qualms about Air America using such people.

CRASH AND AFTERMATH

Because of the ground's proximity and inability to maintain altitude, there was insufficient time to jettison the two loads of 110 sacks of rice and 300 kilos of fresh water buffalo meat. Before bailing from the C-46, Pisith observed the blossoming chutes of his fellow crewmembers. Despite suffering a wound, he encouraged the two men in the cockpit to depart the plane, and placed parachutes on both pilots. However, both were elderly and refused to jump, preferring to nurse B-150 to safety or pancake the wounded machine onto the ground. His attempt to help the pilots resulted in a considerable separation from the main group.

Pisith landed uninjured in a tree. After scrambling down and seeking cover, he heard a voice and realized that after spotting his descending parachute, the enemy was beating the bushes looking for him. Lao AT-6s entered the area at low level, drew ground fire, and departed. Since it was close to dark, no helicopters appeared that day. Rains fell and impeded the enemy search. The highly trained PARU attempted to stay in dark, shaded areas while evading. He eventually entered a stream, where he remained for many hours. He was eventually captured at midnight and marched a long way to the headman's large house in a sizeable village.

Over the next four-year period, in what became an incredible saga of survival and the desire to live, depending on mostly erroneous information of RLA troop movements, he was constantly moved and incarcerated in eleven temporary and permanent prisons.

"Since no one is going to remain in prison until they die, he and his cell mates planned every second, every minute to escape." Therefore, along with the others, Pisith attempted several escapes, but after the first was recaptured in six days. However, a valuable lesson was learned in that it was the wrong time of year, with limited supplies of water available, and unfamiliarity with the area. A better-prepared second escape resulted in over a month's freedom, but his drastically weakened physical state, living off the land, and the remote area, contributed to recapture. Eventually Pisidhi was freed during an external rescue operation conducted by the Lima-39 Customer and Air America pilots.

Unfortunately, Pisith was the only remaining survivor of the C-46 crash to relate this tale.^{5 6}

A CIA information memorandum tracking the September status of C-46 survivors was disseminated to State, AIRA, ARMA, USAID, CINCPAC, PACFLT, PACAF, and ARCAF on 10 October. Sources were not revealed, but most likely emanated from road watch teams and village spies paid to glean information. Some intelligence proven erroneous at the time was deleted from the following summary.

The survivors moved in a northwest direction from where they arrived at Ban Phum Sai, where villagers took them into custody and turned them over to twelve Pathet Lao who had rushed to the crash scene. Patrol members then escorted the crewmen to Moung Phine.

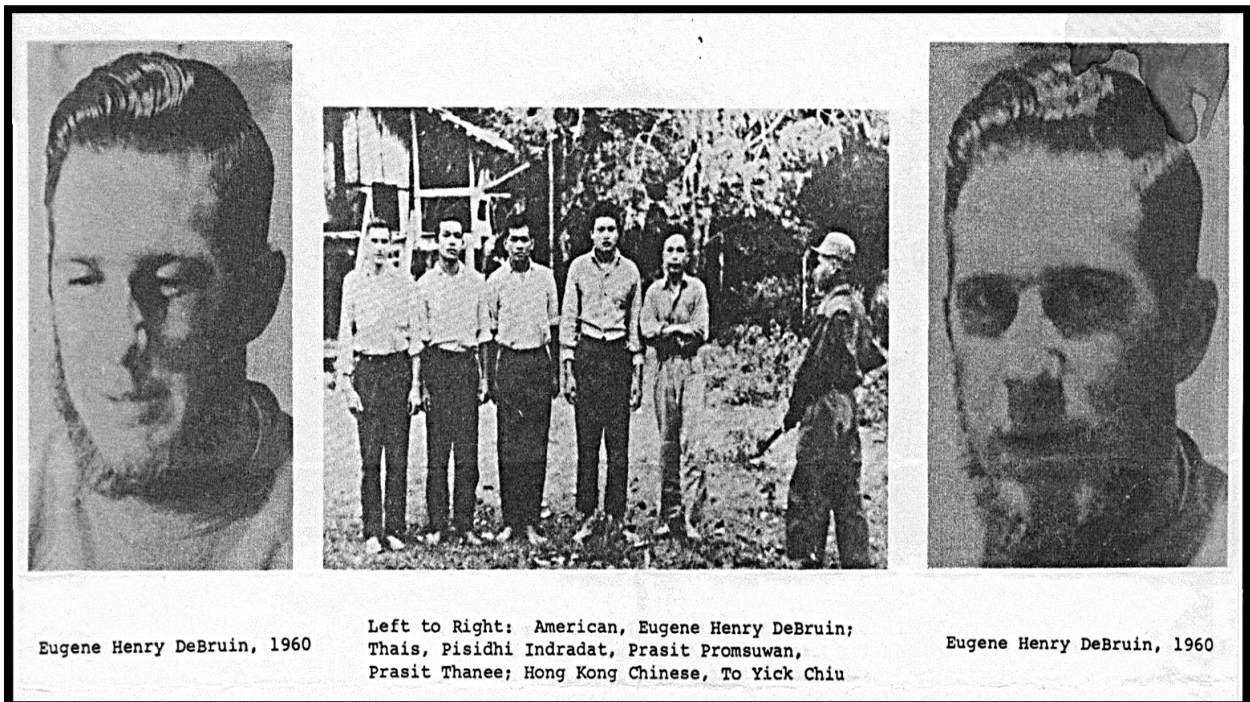
⁵ The rest of Pisith Indradat's fantastic story of numerous prisons, escapes, and survival will be related in the 1967 book.

⁶ Author Interview with Pisith in Bangkok, Thailand, 03/95. Pisidhi Indradat's story, *Prisoner in Laos: A Story of Survival*. Ladue Email, 02/23/10.

Directly following the shoot down and subsequent capture of the Air America crewmen, Pathet Lao propaganda units in the Tchepone area began spreading stories that the POWs provided proof of the lies and deception of Rightist leaders who claimed that no Americans were involved in Laos. They indicated that the POWs would be well fed, kept clean and healthy, so they could be displayed in Hanoi and taken to the World Court.

On 7 September, guards moved two Prisoners of War eastward along Route-9 in the direction of Ban Tha Khong, two miles east of the Tchepone airfield. On the 19th the remaining prisoners were moved eastward to join the other two. On the same day, a merchant reported talking with villagers from Ban Sop Nam and Tha Khong who observed POWs walking from the direction of Moung Phine and were escorted into the Tha Khong PL camp located on the north side of Route-9 on the west side of the Bang Hieng River. Little changed since the time of French control, a six-foot, ten-strand barbed wire fence surrounded the large camp. Corroborating this intelligence, a villager from Tha Khong, alerted by a propaganda unit, went to the camp entrance. He observed POWs, including an unspecified number of Caucasians, entering the single gate. Most villagers pitied the POWs; although others believed the Pathet Lao propaganda and criticized the Americans for interfering in Lao affairs.

By 29 September, a Ban Houei Kok villager stated that all POWs were detained in a large covered hole in the center of the compound. The crewmembers were being fed, but losing weight because of the unaccustomed diet. When asked about the possibility of a successful raid to recover the prisoners, the man indicated that because of limited movement allowed residents in the area, the degree of difficulty negated feasibility of such an operation. With a guardhouse just inside the gate, security was tight and, because no villagers were allowed into



Part of a leaflet dropped in eastern Military Region Three seeking the whereabouts of Gene DeBruin. The photo in the center showing the five survivors of C-123 B-150 was taken by Pathet Lao and distributed for political purposes shortly after the crew's capture. Pisidhi was the only member of the crew to later be rescued from captivity.

LaDue Collection.

the camp, contact with the POWs was not deemed possible. Furthermore, the number of guards changed frequently. Overall, it was believed that the most serious obstacle to any serious rescue attempt would be entry into the Tha Khong area.

It was also reported that a Pathet Lao company remained at the crash site until the 29th, recovering an estimated ton of rice, meat and some documents from the wreckage.⁷

After a time, DeBruin's brother acted unilaterally. He had fliers printed and dropped in the Panhandle soliciting information regarding Eugene. They yielded very little.

In addition to the political liability presented to Souvanna Phouma by worldwide publicity generated by the shoot down, which probably also influenced Ambassador Unger to terminate the C-46 SAR, was the burgeoning unrest in Vientiane on the night of 8/9 and for three following days. Police activity (DNC) in the city was mainly under Rightist Colonel Siho's control. His unit members generally enforced their own law and tried to provoke incidents with the Neutralists, PL, and even some Rightist soldiers. On the night in question, Rightist forces surrounded NHLs minister houses. This was followed by three hours of shooting. One Pathet Lao guard was later discovered dead. To maintain some semblance of a coalition government, a leading Pathet Lao minister, after threatening to leave Vientiane, agreed to remain.

Whenever such incidents occurred, it appeared that the country was deteriorating deeper into anarchy, and the common man always seemed to suffer the most. Ed Reid related to me an incident where two grenades were tossed into the air at the

⁷ CIA Information, 10 October 1963.

open-air market that killed or wounded ninety innocent civilians.

Along with other incidents, I heard that the Vietnamese had moved additional troops across the border. In one area, despite superior numbers, we lost positions because the Lao soldiers ran away. An aggressive bayonet charge at high noon precipitated their departure.⁸

With my anniversary date with the Company approaching, it seemed like military events in Laos were fast approaching a climax.

⁸ The enemy must have read the pulp magazine article regarding Lou Millet's successful bayonet charge during the Korean conflict.

September often produced the heaviest rainfall of the wet season, and, true to form, five days of constant rain inundated the Udorn area. With the ground saturated, the street in front of the house became a quagmire, generally restricting me to the house during the most intense downpours. It was easy to get lazy and, unless an emergency arose, it was not worth venturing out during these periods. The rain tended to cool the area, but because of the extreme humidity, wearing a plastic raincoat caused undue distress. Caesar had a ball splashing in the klongs and mud puddles, and it was difficult to control and keep him clean. For exercise, I walked him along the main road's shoulder when able. Sometimes we traveled a long distance to the teachers' college on the southern periphery of town. The facility had served as the Japanese command headquarters during World War Two. At least one Japanese man chose to remain in town after the war. Occasionally, one saw the huge individual wearing his peaked military hat, while pedaling an oversized bicycle. One day, as we took our constitutional, a young American Army medic unintentionally struck a Thai youngster with a unit Jeep. The medic was terrified, so I flagged down a passing Air America vehicle and Caesar enjoyed his initial truck ride as I helped evacuate the boy to the local hospital.

Don Romes' episode, and the nature of the dangerous work we performed, caused me to seriously reflect on my mortality. Therefore, before leaving for the next upcountry RON at Sam Tong, I scratched out what would become a customary letter home in the event that I failed to return. I reminded the parents of the Company's 10,000-dollar group life insurance, which reputedly doubled in case of the policyholder expiring during

hostile action. I listed my assets and, as my last will and testament had been written, signed, and dated while still in the service, I thought about constructing a new one. In a lighter vein, so as not to appear too pessimistic, I considered enrolling in the Company retirement plan, requiring a twenty-five percent input from a participant.

Recalling the penetrating cold nights at Sam Tong the previous December, I asked my parents to ship the wide-neck portion of my triple layered sleeping bag.¹

For a pittance, along with other surplus items after the war, Dad had purchased three bags from an Army surplus outlet. They were super warm under all conditions. Each section contained authentic down feathers, and the combined unit served me well, living up to all my expectations during scouting weekends when I occasionally slept outdoors in the snow. In requesting the item, knowing the slowness of shipping Army Post Office items, I hoped it would arrive before the cold season was over, for all hands used the greasy, filthy Company-provided bags in the warehouse that no one ever cleaned or aired. In addition to taking the bag on RONS, I planned to open and use it on the bed at home as a comforter.

UPCOUNTRY

I left Udorn on the 15th in Hotel-15. With improving weather in the mountains, the previous pilot, Mike Marshall, had enjoyed a fair RON in the ship that ended in an RTB for a maintenance inspection. Performing back-logged refugee relief work, I finished the first day with almost eight hours.

¹ Sleeping bag: Designed for harsh Arctic conditions, the World War Two bag consisted of separate ground, open necked, and cocoon portions.

I only flew the machine one day before discovering the carburetor throttle rigging was slightly out of synchronization. This condition demanded undue cockpit attention, while trying to establish and maintain proper RPM to perform my job. Problems like this were not uncommon in the early days. John Aspinwall's line maintenance department was understaffed and contained many people with only modest H34 experience. Therefore, with few helicopters in the inventory, and pressure from the Operations Department to turn the helicopters around in the shortest possible time after arriving from upcountry, some real and potential problems developed. It was also unfortunate that many pilots failed to recognize a genuine problem, unless it constituted a major one, and note the item in the appropriate section of the logbook. In all honesty, not all pilots in our program had service-connected test pilot experience, and were not attuned to the ship's finer points. Others, who should have known better, in their zeal to fly as much as possible while upcountry, were not concerned with anything else, or suffered from writer's cramp after returning to Udorn. It was unfortunate, because the H-34 was a complicated machine, one that required a lot of tender loving care and attention to detail when it came to maintenance. These individuals only deceived themselves, for in a spiraling process of diminishing returns, minor discrepancies could magnify over time and blossom into major problems. Exacerbating the situation, knowing full well that most pilots just wanted to fly their allotted time and return to Udorn, Operations liked to keep aircraft upcountry until the one-hundred-hour inspection was due. The pattern became a vicious cycle, one that would cause us some future grief.

The following day evolved into one Pop might have described as a "barn burner," an expression I had never heard until he



Amid a host of curious native onlookers, a Meo assists the Flight Mechanic during manual refueling operations at Sam Tong. A funnel with chamois filter secured with a bungee cord is installed in center fuel tank.

Mike Marshall Collection.

uttered it one night while engaging in his beloved poker games. In this case, it related to flight time I flew that day, and marked the beginning of thousands of evacuations over the years. Pushing myself to the limit, keeping the rotors turning and the clock running while moving refugees, I logged an amazing twelve plus hours in Hotel-13, far exceeding the ten-hour goal pilots normally sought. ² Better yet, only deducting ten minutes a leg into and out of Site-20, hazardous time was well over eleven hours. That amounted to about 115 dollars in extra pay earned in one day. It seemed that during perilous times, the Customer disregarded his perception of how much it cost to utilize the helicopter per hour, and the floodgates opened.

Helping to amass this time were local shuttles from Ban Na carrying dislocated souls from the Plain of Jars and surrounding areas who let their feet do the talking when judging enemy intent in their homelands. Equally important was a rapid refueling turnaround. In this situation, more than willing Meo helpers aided my flight mechanic, Ben Naval. As opposed to short hops, on longer flights I was able to rest and daydream a little. These flights involved hauling corrugated tin sheets to Phou Cum (Site-50) and other outlying sites. Flown in by Caribou, the high demand item was highly prized by natives as an easy-to-install and durable roofing material to replace the labor-intensive thatching. One problem I initially experienced was judging an individual sheet's weight. Weight was not marked on the thin, shiny metal pieces, and neither Naval nor Tom Ward had the faintest idea how much a single sheet weighed. Consequently, I employed the accepted method of carrying unknown

² We still only logged fuel loads, unless switched from a local mission to one more remote. Normally, time between departure and shut down included the better part of three hours.

items: loading a number and then attempting to lift off the ground. Invariably, because of the perception of a small load, too many sheets were placed on the cabin floor. Therefore, after removing a few sheets and enabling a hover to a sufficient height to ensure a safe take off, I completed the mission.

I encountered a similar problem with payloads when tasked by Vint Lawrence to haul lumber from Tha Tam Bleung (Lima Site-72), six miles northeast to Sam Tong. The rude sawmill was located in a high, narrow valley (4,500 feet) containing abundant timber resources to draw upon. My problem revolved around estimating a reasonable weight for the wet, green wood. I was invariably wrong and forced to draw on my experience with the galvanized tin. After loading wood, I attempted to hover, and usually had to offload a sufficient amount of the wet boards until I could depart. It was a slow process, but carpenters needed the material to expand the Sam Tong complex.

LUKE-THE WALKING PRIEST OF LAOS

While still learning the area, I met Father Lucien Bouchard, a Catholic priest assigned to work in Laos from an Oblate of Mary Immaculate order that produced outstanding men who dedicated their lives to missionary work. As directed by his order, Bouchard was charged to minister to the Meo and other tribal people in Military Region Two.

Returning from the east late in the day, while crossing the Padong ridge gap, I heard a weak transmission on VHF.

"Helicopter this is the Padre..." Then static and a garbled transmission followed. Since I was flying over a heavily forested area with no visible openings or sites, the unfamiliar voice shocked me. From the beginning of our upcountry work, Customers advised us not to return with unauthorized people.

Usually, a designated guide or person rode along to help ensure this requirement.

Curious, I keyed the mike, "*Unidentified person, say again.*"

A voice with a Massachusetts accent that I recognized from associating with several men from Boston, like Art Conley and John Costa, during my U.S. Marine Corps training days at Quantico, answered, "*Helicopter pilot this is the Padre. I need a ride back to Sam Tong.*" Then I recalled Pop mentioning a priest he greatly admired, one who constantly walked the narrow trails far into the remote reaches of Laos. Deviating from the established SOP of not carrying anyone who was not authorized by a loader or a Customer, we were allowed to ferry him any time he requested a ride. Therefore, while he directed me into a tiny opening in the trees, I landed. Some of the people standing outside the rotor diameter looked strangely familiar.

After he crawled into the cockpit, I started back to the base and learned that some of his tasks involved ministering to leper colonies ostracized from normal Meo society. This revelation had no negative impact on me, for while working with lepers on an island offshore from Okinawa, I learned about the three major categories of leprosy, none particularly contagious with only casual contact. Although a revolting and unsightly condition, the Ryukan officials convinced me not to fear the disease. I even shook hands with a man who had no fingers.

Because of his outstanding dedication to duty, most pilots came to love "Father B." Wayne Knight Had met Father "B" in December 1961. At the time, many pilots refused to fly "B's" lepers, but after convincing Wayne there was no health hazard, he often transported them to outlying villages. Sometimes the first move was not remote enough to satisfy local sensitivities,

so leper sites were generally relocated many miles east around San Tiau (Site-2) and beyond. ³

Wearing the characteristic black clothing of hill tribesmen, the man looked nothing like any priest I had ever seen. He was not very large, but the signature beat-up straw hat he wore greatly enhanced his thin stature. On his way to Sam Tong to provide communion to his flock in the small thatch church there, he smiled, genuinely pleased that I had stopped for him, and he joked about my surprised reaction about hearing his voice from the jungle. The initial encounter began years of friendship and an enduring source of privately shared amusement between us.

That night, I learned that Luke ⁴ had arrived in country during November 1956 along with Father Matt Menger. Like others in his order who served in Laos for decades, he dedicated his life work ministering to the hill tribe people. He casually indicated that despite murders of eleven missionaries over the years by Pathet Lao agents, he would never depart the country. He had worked in Sam Neua Province for two years, and was in the remote city the night it was attacked by the enemy toward the end of September 1960. Pre-warned, he escaped from the mission house with three others and walked south for six days until reaching Ban Ban. However, during the evacuation process he lost his large consecrated silver crucifix, a symbol of his trade. ⁵

³ EW Knight Emails, 01/25/01; 01/29/01.
Dick Elder Tape, 08/31/88.

⁴ Luke: Because of our particular bonding, I preferred this nickname rather than Father "B."

⁵ Years later, the silver cross was returned to Bouchard by one of his former adherents.

In December Bouchard took home leave. At the same time, he continued his religious education and returned to Laos in February 1962.

Luke had previously met Pop Buell at Lat Houang in mid-1960. The two became close friends, and Bouchard used Sam Tong as his base of operation when Pop moved the refugee camp over to Site-20 from Long Tieng. From there, taking a Helio Courier when available, he would minister to ten villages in various areas. ⁶

Despite the animosity of Pathet Lao guerrillas, and with a price on his head, he continued to work extensively with Meo and other tribal groups in Sam Neua Province, where he claimed 5,000 Christian converts lived. One such area included Ban Phia Kham (Site-87), located in high mountains seven miles north of Sam Neua town. Traditionally, the people of Phia Kham fiercely opposed communist intimidation and propaganda over the years. For their stubborn opposition, they paid a harsh penalty. A decent trail leading out of Sam Neua gave Pathet Lao soldiers access to local villages. From time to time, enemy patrols entered a village soliciting lodging, provisions, or porters. Usually forewarned, many villagers fled to the security of higher elevations and waited for the hostiles to leave.

Recently an enemy patrol had entered Phia Kham and discovered all the young men absent. The villagers extended food and lodging to the men, but their hospitality was rewarded with an act of senseless violence. Before the soldiers departed, as an object lesson, they lined up the old men and methodically shot each one in the leg. Father "B" arrived shortly after the heinous incident and arranged to have the wounded flown to the Sam Tong hospital for treatment.

⁶ Fred Benson, Interview of Lucien Bouchard, 12/11/13, 2, 4-6, 8-9.



Beloved Father Lucien Bouchard, aka Father "B" or Luke, sans his trademark straw hat, at Long Tieng in later years.
Author Collection.

Communist philosophy included various tactics to gain support of the people. In areas where the populace enjoyed a modicum of military security and support from the government, the Pathet Lao freely worked with the people in the fields and villages to gain their support. However, like the case at Phia Kham, in other areas remote from RLG influence, the communists resorted to varying degrees of terror tactics to achieve success in their objectives. ⁷

It was difficult not to like and respect both the man and the Priest, and we all had a great deal of respect for Luke. Part of our support for Father "B" related to his life-long chosen missionary work, dedication to spreading Christianity, and his outstanding help to shunned lepers. An inspiration to us, most, even though not of the Catholic faith, helped support "the walking Padre" with transportation, friendship, and money at one time or another.

However, there was an additional relationship between Customers, pilots, and the Priest. This could be aptly expressed as a Quid Pro Quo--"you scratch my back and I will scratch yours." Pop, who adored Luke, provided transport, medicine, and other items for the Padre's villagers. In return, particularly when working with Lao Theung, "B" provided the Agency and USAID valuable information relating to area security, movements or other enemy activity, condition of the rice crops, villager sickness or other potential health epidemics, and the overall general mood or fears of the people.

Based on Luke's intelligence, offered out of concern for the safety of Americans and local people, many times AID officials dispatched representatives to calm and assure the

⁷ Doctor Charles Weldon, 72-73.

people that a perceived inflammatory situation constituted no major problem. These simple measures avoided unnecessary refugee movements occurring from unwarranted panic. To us pilots, the man was a godsend, providing critical information in areas we worked. I recall him telling me that if forced down and obliged to walk out, I should stay off major trails, for the majority had been liberally mined by all sides over the years.

During early RON's at Sam Tong, Luke generally wandered into the warehouse as the pilots heated baked beans, spaghetti, or other similar canned goods for dinner. Noting how skinny the man appeared, they always asked him to join in their repast. In what became a ritual, he respectfully begged off. However, at the pilots' insistence, after conceding, he proceeded to eat twice as much as any other crewmember. One-night Elmer Munsell produced a bottle of scotch and offered "B" a drink. The denial game proceeded in like manner. Finally, Luke relented and drank more booze than any pilot. However, such activity was uncommon and nocturnal drinking among the crews definitely not the norm during the early period, for days were too long and nights far too short.

One pilot, Mike Marshall, although admiring the man of God, failed to receive the warm vibrations from Luke that others felt. Early on, Pop, for his own reasons, forewarned pilots that the Padre did not like to be bothered while at Sam Tong. That was his R&R period. Mike noted that, hungry for information on a Western world he no longer had access to, Luke spent most of his leisure time reviewing old books and magazines. The Captain resented this, for he earnestly yearned to talk to the man. However, he perceived that the Padre had little use for pilots, perhaps because some, like Bill Cook, bragged about how much money they earned working for Air America. Pop, who received the miniscule sum of fifty dollars a week, also resented such talk.

Mike believed that the Father's attitude was not particularly ugly toward him, but thought perhaps the man of God just had other important items on his mind.

Like Tong Sar, to accommodate a particular individual's request, Luke procured native artifacts. The difference between him and the greedy Tong Sar being that he quoted rifles, necklaces, and crossbows he obtained at reasonable prices. ⁸

DEADHEADING

After flying seven plus thirty-five hours, I was relieved. Sometimes a pre-announcement from an inbound aircraft, or a radio message from the Udorn radio station, alerted a pilot that he was being relieved. The actual exchange depended on the individual's arrival time and the H-34 pilot's location. If working locally, there was no problem, and the torch was easily passed during a refueling break. If operating from an outlying site, the arriving pilot was obligated to wait until you returned to base, or he caught a ride to your location. In the early days, with few aircraft operating in the area, this was almost impossible to effect, and was not recommended, so most individuals elected to wait at Sam Tong. If a man arrived early, an unwritten rule customarily allowed the original PIC to fly at least one fuel load, unless he elected to terminate his flight and hop on a return flight to Vientiane. Sometimes, unscrupulous pilots, sensing or learning of inbound relief, arranged with the Customer to work the entire day at a remote site. Fortunately, this greed factor was not widespread.

⁸ Blaine Jensen Letters, 05/01/96, 06/08/96.
EW Knight Email, 06/01/00.
Mike Marshall Email, 08/13/99.

Once relieved, one had to search for a ride south. With proper communications, luck, and coordination, connections were easy, particularly if you were able to link up with the same flight arriving with the relief pilot, and the plane was returning directly to Vientiane or Udorn. At other times such exchange was physically impossible. During spates of bad weather or a lack of transportation, the individual had to wait until the following day to return home. Obviously, because of limited room in the warehouse and scarce provisions, neither the Customer nor the pilot welcomed a delay.

The process, known as deadheading, could be frustrating because of the necessity of having to scrounge a flight, the delays, and the fact that one had to haul all his RON gear. Normally assigned an aircraft to fly out of Udorn, we had not deadheaded much previously, but with our return to Laos, we did not always have the luxury of piloting our own helicopter. The Company compensated a pilot five dollars per hour flying on its own aircraft. Non-Company aircraft was a freebie.

Increased flight activity and deadheading was a harbinger of things to come. One might deadhead anywhere in the system on any type of aircraft. Indeed, over the years, I traveled on every kind of Company and Bird Air equipment, which later became Continental Air Services. The process enabled me to meet fixed wing pilots I normally had no contact with in Vientiane. From the cockpit in smaller planes and the jump seat in larger ones, I had the unique opportunity to observe procedures and learn sight pictures on takeoffs and landings. From this little exposure, I believed that I could have piloted some of the planes with a little training and hands on experience. Some of the more confident STOL pilots actually let me fly the little birds.

Tending to double travel problems, deadheading became more tedious should a flight from Sam Tong terminate at Vientiane. In such a case, it became necessary to offload one's gear and inquire at the Air Operations desk or with Operation Managers Larry Joseph or Tom Krohn, as to further connections to Udorn. Again, if lucky, one caught the last flight home. If not, a RON was necessary in town, something I did not favor from an economic standpoint. The lack of clean clothes and money were prime factors, but such delays did afford the rare opportunity to visit with fixed wing pilots in the snack bar between their supply flight shuttles.

There were a couple of times when I arrived in Vientiane early in the day feeling unwell, and found no transportation to Sierra-08 projected for hours. In such a case, instead of waiting for a ride that might never materialize, I hired a taxi to take me to the Tha Deua boat crossing on the Mekong.⁹

Inter-country travel was not difficult. The customs guard, hiding from the sun's rays in his tiny kiosk, generally asked for a passport, but my uniform or the Wattay Airport gate pass invariably cowed the dull individual. Then, after a boat ride to Nong Khai--no customs official or security present--I would hitch a ride to Udorn in one of the numerous commercial trucks transiting the area. Although functional, it was not always fun, for the drivers exhibited dangerous tendencies and the dusty laterite road was full of back-breaking potholes.

Luck was with me on this particular day. I caught a Bird and Son plane to Vientiane, followed by a ride to Udorn on Caribou B-851. However, the gaggle was still not complete. Each time, I still had to offload my RON gear, lightened by the water I dumped at Sam Tong, load it on the truck for a ride to the

⁹ The road from Vientiane to Tha Deua was rebuilt and asphalted by a Seabee detachment in 1963.



A C-7 Caribou parked at Wattay Airport, Vientiane, Laos. If not assigned an H-34 at Udorn, I deadheaded upcountry and back on this type of aircraft many times in the early years.

Air America Log, Volume 5, #6, 1971.

Transportation Department, and then offload it again pending a ride home.

Aware that there was probably nothing left to eat at the house, I elected to eat at the Club, where the menu now included steak, large butterfly fried prawns, pork, vegetables, and "safe" salads. After an excellent meal, I negotiated a ride to the house and again loaded the gear.¹⁰

After pushing the vibrating helicopter through the sky for twenty-seven and a half hours in less than two and a half days, I was exhausted. Taking a couple of days to recover, I again wondered how pilots consistently flew ten hours each day for a week or more. They bragged that they became used to the physical beating and long hours, but I was skeptical. I reflected that either their posteriors had to be tough as nails, or they were gross liars and padded the logbook. In the future, when flying increased, Billy P, always trying to be innovative, speculated that tilting the hard seat cushion up in its recess would relieve stress and strain on the butt and back. The method served as a temporary fix, but the real solution was not to fly, and that was not a problem, for we were not flying much more than thirty hours a month.

¹⁰ Mental quiz for the reader: how many times was my gear loaded and offloaded? Don't forget arrival at the house.

On the domestic front at Sopa Villa, I discovered Sang to be a skillful cook. With this necessity of life largely cared for, I became progressively lazy, regressing into sleeping and reading modes on my substantial time off the flight schedule. I did have to conduct occasional forays to the Air America store, STARCOM PX, and Kangaroo Market in town for supplies. Sang took care of daily purchases at the morning market for Caesar's meat and other consumables. Because of unreliable electric power, even with the small refrigerator, perishables were kept to a minimum.

A hearty breakfast usually consisted of canned juice (to get the vital juices flowing), poached eggs or cheese omelet, powdered milk for both the dog and myself, and fruit. Since my Mother had raised me on similar food, Campbell's soup, and cheese and tomato sandwiches, with bread purchased at the Prach, sufficed. An inexpensive kerosene stove provided the means to heat soup, but noxious fumed byproducts left a distinct petroleum taste in the liquid. To supplement my food intake and ensure good health, I daily ingested Hudson multi-vitamins and extra B complex tablets obtained from the Air America clinic.

When not dining at the Club fifty to seventy-five percent of the time, depending on what I selected, and what was available at the market, my favorite supper at home was usually a variety of fried rice. Cooked in a wok containing pork-fat oil, khao phat could include chicken, pork, or prawns. After the meat or seafood was stir-fried, rice and green onions were added and stirred into the mixture. Embellishing the delicious meal, seasonal cucumbers were added to the plate. Varying meals, Sang also cooked shrimp and fried potatoes.

Sang refused to cook on the nasty-smelling kerosene stove I had purchased in town while still a "bachelor." Instead, she preferred using two clay hibachi-type receptacles imbedded in a long white tile-covered counter set against the kitchen's back wall. A majority of townspeople used inexpensive charcoal for cooking. Watching this process was interesting, but a little dangerous if one was not careful. Locals produced charcoal mostly in cottage industries. Green wood was fired and reduced in makeshift piles of dirt. Depending on a local manufacturer's experience, expertise, and desire to hasten his product to market, varying grades of inferior charcoal were produced. The worst material contained trapped air pockets that often exploded when blazing. Results were spectacular, with sparks and pieces of burning embers popping and spraying around the room. Sang possessed a knack and patience using the material, and managed to utilize the combustible matter to advantage. Like any charcoal briquettes, when burned to a covering ash, they provided sufficient heat for the job. Sang occasionally barbecued fowl using the Thai method of placing it on a small piece of chicken wire that lay flat over the hibachi top.

Depending on the military circuit and availability of films, to allay domestic boredom, a couple of times a week we rode to the Club with the Estes family to view a movie.

Searching for additional employee activities, Ben Moore and Dick Elder coaxed Abe Rivero into manufacturing giant bingo cards and associated paraphernalia to conduct games. Gamblers in the group, of which there were many among the diverse nationalities represented, eagerly awaited the initial session. Positively unlucky at gaming, but always willing to try something new, along with Howard and Deanie, Sang and I attended the first night. Held in the movie room, Abe performed the ritual of calling the numbers. Everything seemed to progress

satisfactorily until Dianne Elder shouted bingo three consecutive times. The prizes were not elaborate, perhaps a case of beer, but feelings of collusion prevailed among us non-winners. The episode left a very bad taste in my mouth, as I am sure it did others (Deanie certainly wasn't impressed), for no one was that lucky. It was even more suspicious because of Dick's close involvement in the project and Dianne's early card selection. Preferring our own pursuits, we never participated in bingo again. The Chinese in the group did not participate in bingo, as they were too engrossed in traditional games of Mahjong. ¹

I only flew once more during the month. On the 24th, following a test flight, I ferried Hotel-12 to Vientiane. With aircraft movement dependent on upcountry requirements, such flights were frequent and necessary. Since my earlier RON was relatively high time, Operations scheduled me for this trip in an attempt to evenly distribute all pilots' flight time. Although it took nearly a day to complete, I did not mind the abbreviated trip, for it provided a diversion from my life of leisure and a chance to obtain scarce commissary goodies. However, scrounging a return deadhead flight on 851 proved a bit tedious.

¹ Bingo games terminated in November when additional allegations of cheating surfaced.

During the third week of September, with the Lao conflict temporarily on hold during the height of the rainy season, and opposing forces located on the Plain of Jars roughly at parity, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, at the invitation of the Kennedy Administration, again visited Washington to obtain added support, particularly a needed morale boost.

A NSC memo, noting many difficulties emanating from both left and right factions, indicated that Souvanna required assistance to ensure due diligence in maintaining Geneva Accords protocols. Talks revealed continued distrust within RLG members regarding Viet Minh presence in country--which Hanoi always disavowed--and General Phoumi's suspicions and wariness of Pathet Lao intentions. All agreed that North Vietnamese leaders did not seek peace in Laos, and that an eventual outcome depended on a South Vietnam settlement. In addition, the North did not want the RLG to extend its authority throughout the country because such a move would deny the North Vietnamese logistic trails into South Vietnam.

Souvanna optimistically alleged that a vast majority of his people supported neutrality, and this was the primary reason Pathet Lao officials were reluctant to allow ICC investigation into enemy held areas. However, through Souphannouvong and other NLHX ministers' feelers about returning to Vientiane, he did not believe the Pathet Lao desired a complete dissolution of the coalition government. Failure of leading leftist politicians to leave the capital following the trouble earlier in the month seemed to support this belief. Furthermore, despite Moscow leaders' waning influence in Laos, the Soviet Ambassador's apparent help in attempting to influence the recalcitrant ICC

Polish Commissioner, Marek Thee, who always sided with the Pathet Lao, could not be discounted.

Circumventing speculation about military activity once the rains ceased, except that it largely depended on the North Vietnamese, the Prime Minister indicated that fear of a wider war prevented the Vietnamese from encroaching on the Mekong. JFK boasted that the U.S. would never accept communist control of Laos, and would continue to help prevent such a situation.

In parting, Phouma agreed to forward a telegram to the NLHX requesting information concerning the welfare and immediate release of the Air America C-46 survivors. ¹

VILLAGE CLUSTER PROGRAM

As Viet Cong insurgents had successfully accomplished in South Vietnam, by applying techniques of revolutionary warfare, the Pathet Lao movement then attempted to influence rural Lao people to accept communist philosophy. Therefore, by using the Village Cluster concept and Refugee Relief Programs, USAID--inclusive of IVS personnel--and the RLG endeavored to counter the destructive ideology. The methods also tended to provide a buffer zone between Vientiane and friendly Meo areas south of the Plain of Jars.

In September, the Cluster Program began on a small scale as a pilot rural development program tailored for lowland areas where ethnic Lao predominated. Strategic considerations were important, for many envisioned village clusters were located in proximity to leftist areas. Lao provincial officials and AID counterparts first interfaced with village leaders to assess important needs such as wells, schools, roads, realistic

¹ Edward Keefer and Glenn LaFantasie eds., *Lao Crises* #488 (Forrestal), 489 (Toumayan), 21, 23 September 1963.

irrigation dams, dispensaries, agriculture, and livestock. Armed with this knowledge, trained workers provided assistance for the improvement of education, health, agriculture, and transportation within the sphere of existing villages.

Normally, a central market town was selected as the headquarters and served surrounding villages that numbered as many as two dozen. The program stressed self-help, with villagers providing labor, land, and locally obtained materials. Lao government and AID representatives would dispense difficult-to-obtain advice, equipment, and materials. As always, success depended on the cooperation of local leadership and the attitude of villagers.

The program achieved a modicum of success with expansion noted by 1965. ²

² Peter Kunstadter, *Southeast Asian Tribes: Minorities and Nations*-Thomas Ward, *U.S. Aid to Hill Tribes in Laos* Chap 8, 301-302.

I received a letter from the home front stating that Mom and Dad had received an unsigned vindictive letter. Clearly emanating from Fairy, the handwritten missive confused my folks by bitterly indicating that Sang was having my baby, and disparagingly alluding to my "White Soul." The question in my mind was 'why would she take the pains to do something like this?' When apprised of Fairy's act, Sang was surprised, and used the Thai expression for crazy. As both lived in the same area of town and certainly knew each other, Fairy would have learned through the grapevine about our present status. Not wanting to let go, apparently, she clung to some inane idea that we might get back together. Her reasoning was flawed, for I had no intention of reconciliation. Yes, she could be crazy and capable of evil deeds. Since she was still in Bangkok, I had no contact with her, and would have to wait for future developments.

Upset that Fairy took the opportunity to agitate my aged parents, I wrote Mom that it sounded like Fairy was trying to cause trouble, that she should not communicate with her and attempt to forget that the relationship ever existed.

"G" MODELS

As part of the Kennedy Administration's general plan to expand the Lao Military Assistance Program (MAP) and General Ma's Royal Lao Air Force airlift capability, since April USG had transferred several additional aircraft to the Lao. Three aircraft were Sikorsky helicopters. These ships were dispatched to Udorn with the understanding that when sufficient Lao

helicopter pilots were trained, the ships would revert to Lao control. ¹

During the final week in September, we received three of these helicopters. First arriving by ship at Klong Touey south of Bangkok, the diverted machines were not the beloved Marine UH-34D aircraft presently in our inventory, but Coast Guard "G" models equipped with items no one had ever seen before. At first, we were happy to have them, for they represented almost a doubling of our fleet and a certain increase to our flight time and pay.

When I examined one on the ramp, it was obvious that the machine had been not used for some time and would require a thorough inspection and effort to remove redundant components that increased the gross weight. At the very least, workers would have to spray olive drab paint over the orange and gray Coast Guard colors.

Opening the clamshell doors revealed an additional generator--operated from an engine accessory drive shaft--and an elaborate fire suppression system. Servos installed in the throttle box incorporated a boost system to the cockpit throttle linkage calculated to ease pilot workload. In discussing this feature, no one had previously heard of a helicopter equipped with such a system, or the necessity for one. However, the word on the street indicated that the throttle on this particular model was highly sensitive. We really did not need to contend with any additional workload, for our attention was already divided enough during normal mountain landings. Because of the unwavering pressure for ships in the field, a lack of maintenance manuals, or Department of Defense approval, the Maintenance and Operations Departments elected not to retrofit

¹ Victor Anthony, 90.

the boost system to a true UH-34D configuration at this time. When the machines cleared maintenance and exited the barn, we would have access to the system and do the best we could with it.

Following his fall Pakse field tour, International Voluntary Service worker Joe Flipse returned to Vientiane. Within a short time, AID officials assigned him to Ban Houei Sai in northwest Laos along with another round eye type, Mike Cunningham, and six Lao assistants. While scrounging for useful equipment to establish a semi-bearable lifestyle, the worldly Flipse discovered a sizeable stash of Pop Buell's military gear in the corner of the Rural Development Department building next to the Commissary. Without thoughts of retribution, he "liberated" cots, sleeping bags, blankets, and other items that former White Star personnel had discarded when they vacated Sam Tong. On moving day, along with the purloined gear, a yellow Jeep he had previously repaired and painted was loaded on a C-123

After arrival at Site-25, the men camped out on the hill under a tarpaulin for two days. Then they rented a stilt thatched style shack for 500 kip per month. (The exchange rate at the time was 150 to one U.S. dollar.) Afterward, they arranged a satisfactory daily meal arrangement with a local noodle shop.

Because of Ban Houei Sai's remote location, AID insisted that the small group have a single side band radio. This electronic gear heightened local suspicion regarding the new arrivals. White Star's departure, and now the arrival of this new group equipped with a modern radio capable of contacting Vientiane, tended to confirm to many local people and military that Joe and his cohorts were indeed CIA operatives. Their distrust would soon be evidenced by confusion and a general lack of Lao support for the mission. Joe, naïve at first, later



USAID Jeep parked in front of the Ban Houei Sai house.
Flipse Collection.



Aid workers initial housing. A "Tropical Paradise" at Ban Houei Sai, Laos.

Flipse Collection.

discovered that indeed, the International Voluntary Service (IVS) team was not at Ban Houei Sai for purely altruistic means, but to show the American flag and provide a warning bell for the U.S. Embassy. He also later discovered from Bill Young that IVS workers were closely followed by FAR undercover agents while moving through villages inquiring about the status of wells, irrigation, schools, and other basic needs. Pathet Lao agents were also watching the newly arrived team with interest.

Initially there was little of note transmitted on fixed crystal single sideband radios, unlike the variable frequency single sideband radios the Agency and USAF used. It was mostly housekeeping traffic, with people going home at five o'clock. If trouble was indicated, Pop would have been Joe's only contact, and Buell did not often use his radio. One could listen to the radio every day and fail to learn that a war was being waged in the country. There were exceptions, but they were rare.

Later, as radio traffic increased, radio operators were assigned and AID began sending a lot of superfluous information over the frequency. Refugee relief conversation was always related to rice drops. As additional Thai radio operators were hired possessing poor English capability, transmissions like sticky rice became "stikey lice." Therefore, to avoid misunderstanding, Morse code key became the norm.

SKY (Agency) or troop information was usually delivered by hand or pouch. To circumvent this system regarding sensitive items, Joe devised the simple euphemism Christians in Action. This phrase puzzled representatives at Sam Tong and Na Khang. Curious, they eventually asked, "*Why are you and Jack Williamson always talking about the Christians. Are you having trouble with the missionaries?*" They never resolved the ploy until it was explained. Thereafter, Christians in Action became standard usage upcountry among AID types.

THE RAT CAPER

Earlier, while still in Vientiane, Joe worked with a rat extermination specialist. The RLG requested assistance with the town's large rodent infestation, so AID sent a man from the states to initiate an eradication program. For six weeks, Joe and the ratter stayed in the guesthouse across the road from the AID compound. During this period, Joe considered him the most frustrated man in Laos. Sarong clad women bathed bare breasted at the community well adjacent to the house. Hoping to record the exhibition, he ran excitedly to get his camera, but by the time he returned, the ladies were always in a less revealing state. This occurred so many times that Joe believed the women were certainly playing a game and simply obtaining amusement at the expense of their foreigner. Rat man never managed to snap a semi-nude picture.

Possessing some knowledge concerning rat extermination, Joe believed a program would work in Ban Houei Sai and enhance the IVS image. Therefore, he convinced his superiors to deliver bait to the river town. To initiate a publicity campaign, he constructed posters, met with officials, and went house-to-house distributing bait and instructions. He also paid a bounty of a hundred kip per dead rat delivered to the town's administrative office. The rat program looked successful. Women lined up at the office with fifty rats a day. Government officials distributed cash without stealing any. It appeared that IVS was finally providing a constructive and worthwhile project for the people.

A week after the operation commenced, the Assistant Chao Moung, Pow, arrived at the house. Joe indicated that the rat eradication appeared to be succeeding really well and, looking for a compliment, asked the high official if that was not true. Instead, he was shocked when the man said he had to cease all activity. Becoming defensive, Flipse reminded him that Vientiane

government officials approved the program. Despite this, Pow indicated that the program had to cease because the Lao Public Health Department indicated it constituted a health hazard. Not convinced, Joe went to talk to the doctor. His Lao not yet proficient, he learned through his interpreters that the doctor was adamant about the agenda being a health problem. Disappointed, going from a position of exultation over something he believed was constructive and doing well, Joe's bubble burst, leading him to question his cleverness in the matter. He knew there was more to the episode than merely a health hazard, but was unable to resolve the issue at the time.

As no Lao would talk or admit the true reason for the eradication cancellation, the IVSers remained puzzled. Eventually, Young informed the Americans what had happened. Masters of propaganda, the Pathet Lao, exhibiting enormous influence over the area's leadership infrastructure, broadcast that the Americans introduced poison into the Houei Sai areas. That if there were any casualties among the populace all Nai Bans would be held personally responsible. Of course, the threat alarmed Ban Houei Sai government officials and reinforced the peoples' bad guy image of the IVS team. Incidents like this often occurred about once a month to sour American-Lao relations, and rotated in turn between the military, the police, and government officials.

TAXES

Another incident, not unlike that displayed toward the Meo, showed the poor relationship between the Yao and Lao, and what a little military pressure in the right place could achieve. A contingent of Chao Mai's followers accompanying a mule train had journeyed from Nam Thouei to Nam Yone, a creek junction upriver from Ban Houei Sai. A few men went down to Houei Sai by boat to

procure cigarettes. After returning to Nam Yone and preparing to load the mules, the local police informed them that a tax was due before they could pass into the interior. The Yao were reluctant to pay any tax and sent a runner back to Nam Thouei. A few days later there was a large stir in Ban Houei Sai when a few police arrived and reported that seventy angry Yao had them surrounded and were going to kill them and float the bodies down the Mekong.

Ever since White Star personnel burned his villa in panic when the Pathet Lao threatened to seize Ban Houei Sai after the fall of Nam Tha, the governor of the province resided in Luang Prabang. Therefore, Colonel Kong Kao, commanding officer of BV-18 was not only the head military man in the area, but also top government authority. Considered somewhat of an ass, he had attended Fort Benning, Georgia, and returned with a brass-tipped swagger stick and the bravado to boot. Full combat ready, he had learned how to construct map overlays, starched his uniforms heavily, and romanced the local dollies. He sat at the hilltop fort largely unconcerned, while Pathet Lao forces occupied Ban Pong, twenty kilometers up the Nam Tha Road. He maintained this attitude because he believed the Geneva Accords were sure to work. All he and other Lao had to do was remain neutral and patient while the free world ministered to the country's problems.

All the while, he pretended that Bill Young did not exist. This failed to bother Young, who knew exactly how the Asian face game was played, so he remained at his bungalow across the river. However, when confronted with a Yao insurrection, something never covered at Fort Benning, the colonel moved quickly, boarding a boat for Young's house. Skirting the real reason for the visit, he explained that it was time for them to work together, sharing intelligence and other items. The colonel

pulled out every stop, short of crawling on the floor to make his point. Bill, understanding the actual reason for the visit, enjoyed the performance. He realized the advantage of the new relationship, so he agreed to Kong Kao's proposals. Relieved, the colonel then inquired, "*In the agreed spirit of the new cooperation, could Colonel Tip (a nom de guerre Bill assumed to rank as high as the Lao commander) please do something about the irrational Yao at Nam Yone?*" Seeing an opening, Young indicated that he did not believe he could influence them, for the Lao had been interfering in tribals' lives for a long time. However, if the Lao would promise to treat them more equitably in the future, he would attempt to smooth out the situation. It would be supremely difficult, but he would try. Colonel Kong Kao acceded to this demand. As a result, both Young and the Yao received what they wanted and all parties backed off from the confrontation. At the same time, troops strung a communications line across the river from the bungalow to the BV-18 switchboard.

TRANSITION TO REFUGEE WORK

In addition to normal duties, for a few months, with help from his Lao team, Flipse engaged in construction of a sturdy house from inexpensive mud blocks. Work was hot and difficult, for all materials except mud had to be hauled to the site in five-gallon cans on the Jeep trailer. During the process, Joe's Lao assistants decided that working with him was too dirty and difficult. Furthermore, it was no way to obtain a coveted desk job. Consequently, after project completion, they all returned to Vientiane. This was no problem, for by this time Flipse possessed sufficient command of the language and area knowledge to perform his job without much help.

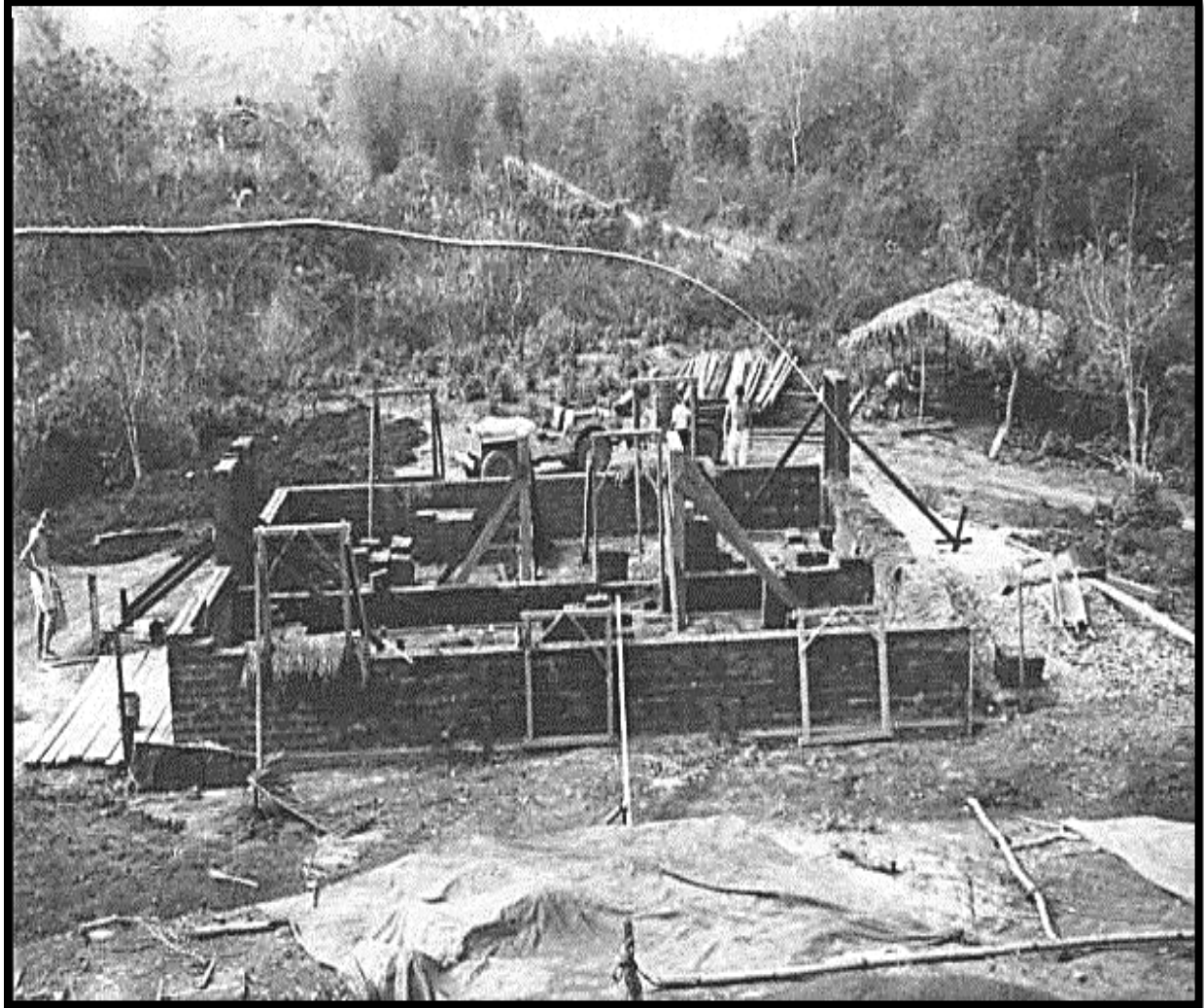


Commencement of the mud block house project at Ban Houei Sai, Laos, site May 1963.

Flipse Collection.



Mud block house footings.
Flipse Collection.



AID mud block house construction June 1963 Ban Houei Sai.
Flipse Collection.

Working with the Lao satisfied Joe for a time, but he believed that by judging him an undercover CIA agent, they withheld considerable support. Therefore, he decided to re-channel his energy and efforts toward helping displaced Yao refugees north at Nam Thouei. Against this end, he lobbied IVS and AID to consider his reassignment into refugee relief. One day, seeking consolation, he was crying the blues to Pop Buell about being a pin on a map and working in Ban Houei Sai with no support or interest from AID personnel. Joe soon learned that Pop had his own particular personnel hiring procedures when he asked Joe to go with him that evening to visit the new AID Public Health Officer, Charles Weldon. Joe believed Pop was full of beans and just putting him off, for the previous public health official was nothing but a ladies' man wearing hand-tailored whites, and who spent an inordinate amount of his working day on the tennis courts. He had never met the Weldons but, hearing that they had worked in American Samoa, he assumed they were bureaucrats of the same ilk.

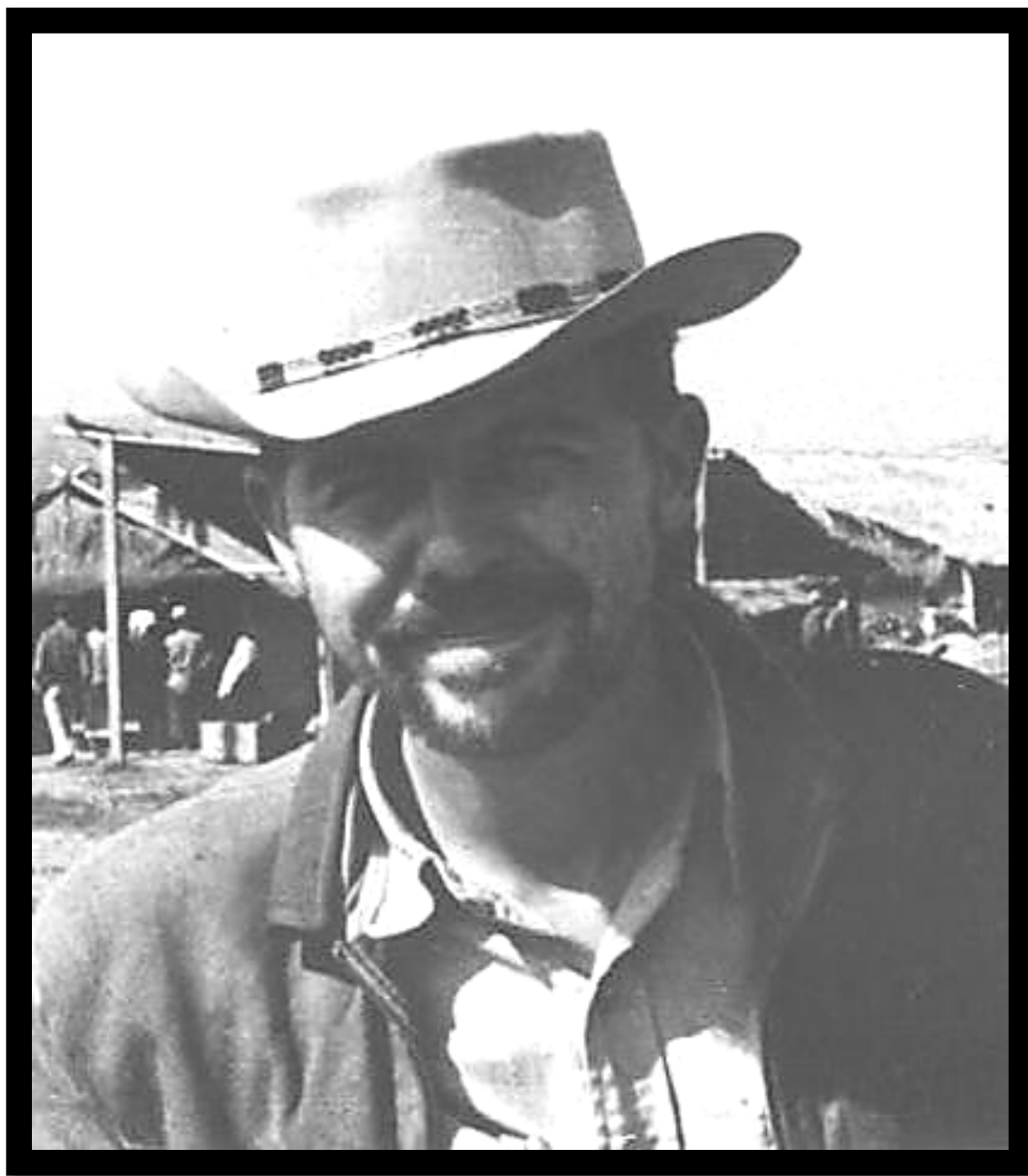
Jiggs and Pat Weldon lived in a modest house across from the compound next to the guesthouse. While Joe talked about the possibility of entering the program, Doc quietly sat on the bed. Joe later understood he was thinking while everyone else wasted time talking. ¹

Ziegler was then working for AID/RDD, and the new COP/IVS, Walt Coward, had worked with Pop in Xieng Khouang Province before the December 1960 enemy rout of RLG forces on the Plain of Jars. Both men knew that Joe entertained militaristic tendencies derived from Army training and background, and that he possessed an M-1 rifle scrounged from a White Star sergeant

¹ Years later, in a glowing testimony to the Weldons' work in Laos, Flipse stated, "*If everybody in AID had been as competent and committed as they were, things would have been a lot different.*"

in Pakse. Therefore, Coward, tending toward a liberal persuasion and following regulations, refused to process Joe's request. Flipse continued to pursue his cause. Coward eventually relented and reluctantly agreed to the change, but predicated on the caveat regarding employee carriage of military type weapons.

During the first week in October, Joe went to Sam Tong to learn more about working with refugees. To observe the action up close, Pop and Joe flew to Ban Na in a Helio Courier. Noting that the strip was grass and not dirt like most he had seen, he speculated that the site had probably not been activated for some time and was not widely used by airplanes. While they sat by the plane and talked, Pop indicated that because of current and anticipated enemy pressure on adjoining Meo hill sites in the northeastern Plain of Jars area, he was preparing to transport a massive influx of refugees into Site-15. They also discussed his weapons restriction. Pop had a laugh over the AID memorandum, for when the squeeze began on the Plain, he had told his fellow worker, Coward, to obtain a weapon and take care of himself instead of depending on others for protection. Aware that there were "no liberals at the end of a hoe handle," this was just the sort of advice Joe expected to hear from a fellow tiller of the soil. Joe's primary concern was never about dying, but, if captured, being displayed in each enemy village during a lengthy walk to prison. After discussing the pros and cons, they decided that the embassy regulation specified only military weapons. Joe could easily circumvent that provision by toting civilian manufactured arms, and then, if necessary, go down shooting.



IVS representative Joe Flipse at the Ban Houei Sai strip 1963. Joe is wearing his hat with a trademark krait band. To the rear are the port terminal and police huts.

Flipse Collection.

WILLAMSON

Later, Jack Williamson landed on the grassy strip in another Helio. Like Joe, the former IVS-ICA volunteer was seeking Pop's help in transitioning to the refugee program.

Williamson, a large individual, had previously worked in Vientiane on a USIS contract as an advisor for the Lao Sport Department. When hired by AID at the end of 1961, he attended the language and charm school at Berkley University. Upon return to Laos, as a community development advisor, Jack became the first AID worker assigned to Sayaboury Town. From time to time, Meo intrigue erupted in the province over acquiring additional supplies and the important political power. Bill Taylor attempted to suppress the more glaring problems. However, other IVS personnel attempting to perform their Christian duty caused more harm than good. As a result, they were ordered not to venture beyond city limits. After White Star vacated Sayaboury, power consolidations began and resulted in an attempted coup by a few Meo. The fracas remained quiet and low key. Consequently, it was not common knowledge within the Mission in Vientiane. Looking for a scapegoat, AID officials blamed Williamson for instigating the mini coup and hastily removed him from the area. However, after finding no one else with strong enough ties with the people and the knowledge to negotiate with opposing parties, when cooler heads prevailed, they recanted and returned Jack to Sayaboury.

Part of the problem in the hills stemmed from a developing animosity between Touby Ly Fong and Vang Pao. Over time, Vang Pao's power and prestige greatly increased with the people of Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua because of tangible American support. The general could offer them air transportation, food, medicine, relief supplies, and money to dole out as he chose. He also controlled access to guns, ammunition, and uniforms.

Even though a hereditary leader, a legal government representative for the Meo, and recognized as such by the RLG and the King, Touby--often referred to as the King of the Meo--had virtually nothing to offer the people but his good name.

He traveled extensively in Military Region Two attempting to garner political support among members of the Ly family, the largest of the Meo tribes, but he gained little satisfaction in the process. Chagrined at his loss of control, he took his case to the Blue Meo in Sayaboury Province, where he had a strong political base with cousins and Ly family members outside Military Region Two.

Touby knew that Williamson had worked in Sayaboury and was well liked by the population there. Therefore, the crafty gentleman asked that Jack be sent up from Vientiane to assess the situation and make suggestions.

What took place next was related by Jack to Pop in the Sam Tong warehouse, where Buell was prepared to chide him for the ruckus in the province. By way of defending himself, Jack related that Touby had assembled all the province leaders for a meeting and he was being set up. Using prepared leading questions, he asked Williamson if the Americans were present in the country to help the Meo. Jack replied in the affirmative. Touby then inquired who was the only Lao Government representative and the King for the Meo tribes. Jack had no choice but reply that Touby was that designated person. Smiling, Touby then proceeded to inform the elders that American help would only be forthcoming if they were loyal to him and not Vang Pao, who possessed no true legal standing with the RLG, or with the King, which was true at this time. Then, using final Asian logic, he stated that this had just been confirmed by their loyal American friend and USG official.

After flapping from this latest subterfuge settled down, Jack was again sent to Sayaboury to conduct interim damage control. This time, he was instructed by the Ambassador to state that USG supported Touby as the civilian leader of the Meo for the Lao government, and General Vang Pao as the military leader, and both of them representatives for the King.

FIRST THE WEEDS, AND THEN ACCEPTANCE

Soon they all left Ban Na, with Pop stating that he would return in an hour after looking into a local problem. The old man never returned that day. Joe sat all afternoon, and then, toward dark, giving up hope of any plane landing, he spent the night sleeping with a platoon of soldiers on the dirt floor of a barrack type structure located downhill and ten minutes from the strip.

The following day, Flipse began wondering if Pop had totally forgotten him. About noon, a Helio arrived to shuttle him to Sam Tong. Pop met the aircraft and asked Joe several questions pertaining to his RON. Joe, used to roughing it, replied that the refugee business could not be as difficult as portrayed, as he spent the preceding twenty-four hours loafing and smoking cigarettes. Pop coughed and said he reckoned Joe would do just fine in the refugee program.

Joe later learned that Pop employed this unusual method of testing prospective individuals, often depositing them at an outlying site overnight and observing their actions. This allowed him to accept or reject those who did not fulfill his standard. According to his methodology to cull the unworthy, the upcountry AID program came first; talking later. There were always numerous interagency squabbles, particularly when under pressure. One could make errors, but if you did not have the

"fire in your belly and were not a true believer," then you were gone.

Most of the volunteers for the USAID refugee program had started with IVS and earned respect by performing the job well in the hard-core refugee program. They were never treated like second class employees by other AID workers. They were rarely questioned if they were administering an area. Pop sometimes complained, but he supported his people and kept problems in house. He was strict with his young men, but Flipse never heard anyone bad-mouth him. Indeed, there were people waiting for a chance to leave the Rural Development Department and go up north.

After Joe passed his field test, Pop approved his request to join the refugee program. A man by the name of Gillion, whom Joe did not know, ran the program in Vientiane, so Joe asked Pop if he should meet him. Pop answered in the affirmative, but cautioned that Joe was not to divulge anything about what he observed upcountry. When Joe understood Pop a lot better, he realized that this advisory, a somewhat paranoid statement merely reflected a typical Buellism, and provided insight into his character. Joe believed that in his homespun way, Pop understood the basic ground rules within AID administration, and generally played the role of the AID worker, but when infighting proved necessary to obtain whatever he needed, he could be as deceitful and wily as any other government bureaucrat.

In Joe's words, Pop was the critical component for the Military Region Two refugee program in the early days. In later years, the program expanded under its own momentum, and funding was forthcoming because of the early credibility resulting from the Sam Tong operation. Another reason for this derived largely from a complimentary article by Don Schanche in the

Saturday Evening Post describing the refugee program in Military Region Two and praising the man behind it. ²

For the first time, Washington received a needed boost. AID enjoyed the favorable publicity regarding the Lao program, and encouraged it. To many people, it was quite clear that without the good press Pop received, the program probably would have been just another fizzle in a series of fizzles.

Following the article, reporters arriving in Vientiane and seeking career-enhancing stories, clamored to go upcountry. The only path to Sam Tong was on closely monitored USG-controlled aircraft. Consequently, the stringers and those sniffing out CIA information remained in Vientiane. Other accredited media such as *National Geographic*, sure to present a favorable picture of the operation, received preferential VIP treatment. With the upcountry restrictions, pressured by their news services, most reporters spent a lot of time talking to other reporters to gather information for their articles. Determined to obtain any story, others made the rounds of USIS, the Constellation Hotel, bars, and the morning market to gather every tidbit of rumor or innuendo pertaining to their subject. Within three days, they usually filed a derogatory story about corruption, opium, or whatever subject was deemed interesting to the public. Then they would move on.

Despite kudos, Buell never pushed Vientiane officials too hard for desired items. He did not have to, for all were well aware that he could write a personal letter to Congressional leaders demanding action. Within the AID system, high level contacts represented real power, and Joe humorously believed

² Don Schanche's *Mister Pop*, an interesting, but factually deficient book, followed much later.

that Pop could have insisted that the ambassador dance if he wished, and everyone knew this.³

³ Joe Flipse Emails, 05/04/97, 05/09/97, 05/21/97, 05/23/97, 05/25/97, 06/09/97, 06/13/97.
Blaine Jensen Letter, 08/27/98.
Mac Thompson Emails concerning the Biographic Register of the U.S. Foreign Service, called the "Stud Book" in the vernacular, 01/27/97, 02/23/97.

After receiving final clearance from Pop Buell and USAID officials to work with upland refugees, and specifically cautioned to stay away from the Chinese border, Flipse returned to Ban Houei Sai by 9 October to begin his Nam Thouei program.

During 1963, Sam Tong controlled much of the USAID refugee relief program in northwestern Military Region One. Throughout the fall of 1963, Ban Nam Thouei (VS-118) with its majority Yao population, a few Chinese Haw traders, a smattering of Lu families, and a small number of Lao Theung, represented the only forward center established in the region to support RLG civilian and military operations.

Agency people chose most refugee sites carefully after considering the accessibility of a decent landing area, good air delivery terrain, plentiful water, land, and protection for their inhabitants. Many years later, Washington officials, without considering that using fixed wing aircraft was not the only method of supplying refugees in the beginning, criticized AID Lao for establishing refugee sites within indefensible valleys. However, naive individuals with little knowledge concerning Lao topography and hydrology, believed tap water flowed through modern pipes. Like the name, residents of Nam (water) Thouei enjoyed an abundance of life-sustaining water from creeks and springs bracketing the valley. In addition, people piped the liquid to their homes using a system of elevated split bamboo troughs. Karst formations lay at the landing portion of the strip, and a sizable ridgeline to the east contained and protected the valley from intruders. One downside common to such sites, winter fog obscured the valley until late morning. However, Ban Na Woua's higher elevation

generally provided an alternate landing site for smaller aircraft to wait until the fog dissipated. However, despite Site-109s availability, landing there was invariably difficult for fixed wing aircraft. As Bob Smith and Bill Young, who crashed in a Helio Courier while carrying cratering charges to develop the runway, could attest, a vicious downdraft usually accompanied an approach and touchdown. The short strip afforded no wave off, therefore, the pilot had to approach high and dive quickly for the deck.

During an early visit to Site-118, Pop established an airdrop schedule for delivering supplies to the few remaining friendly outlying sites. He also arranged to send in some supplies, and rotated two Yao boys to Sam Tong to receive accelerated medic training. When they returned, Joe purloined quantities of medicine from beneath the PARU medic's bed at the Chiang Khong team house to initiate the medical program. Developed by Weldon, from modest beginnings, the medic-training program in the northwest eventually spread into three provinces and involved one hundred medics.

Following the visit, Pop left Joe to his own designs, but he was well aware that both Weldons monitored him. When his workload became too heavy in Military Region Two, Jiggs allocated everyday operations in western Military Region One to his wife, Doctor Pat McCreedy, who provided a great deal of support to Joe and his program. Additionally, the Weldons researched ideas he proposed, and supported anything he wanted to attempt. In the beginning, considering his task highly important, he found the work new, exciting, and providing him maximum satisfaction. Time was not important. Joe did not possess a watch, a calendar, or a radio. There were no weekends. Every night seemed like Saturday night and every morning Monday morning. Therefore, he worked continuously until he became sick.

He discovered that in contrast to the Lao, the refugee people worked to help themselves and only needed assistance with items they were unable to obtain. Planes from Vientiane dropped rice to perhaps 800 people at the site. The drop zone was located to the right of the runway in old abandoned rice paddies and a military training barracks sat at the top of the strip. The barracks was later reconfigured into a hospital, and a school built close by.

When Joe first arrived at Ban Houei Sai in the fall of 1962, PARU teams were located across the Mekong at Chiang Khong. When Houa Kong operations revived during the summer of 1963, half the group relocated to Nam Thouei to train and supervise Yao tribals, who possessed much the same fighting tenacity as the Military Region Two Meo when motivated. The remaining six men remained on the Thai riverbank near Case Officer Bill Young's bungalow to support his far-reaching tribal operation.

People were available and willing to fight in Houa Khong Province, but adequate weapons were in short supply when friendly activity began surfacing again in Sam Neua. The exception was Chao Mai's men, who brought their weapons south when relocating from their old ADC villages. Chao La's people were armed, but still lived in the north. Those Lao Theung ralliers possessing arms had mostly muzzle loading weapons. Since assuming the role of chief Agency honcho for upper Military Region One, the dearth of modern weapons, contrasted by more than adequate supplies of recent vintage ammunition, worried Young and fostered unconventional methods of obtaining them. In one case, Khamsene's men managed to acquire a few modern arms by stealth and courage. They would wait patiently in the jungle along a trail while a single Pathet Lao answered the call of nature. When he was out of sight, they snatched the man's gun and disappeared with their prize. However, this slow

method of augmenting their arms ceased when the enemy began sending patrols out in pairs.

Mauser and Enfield rifles were available throughout the region in various states of disrepair. These, along with food, had been air dropped by Civil Air Transport planes around Moung Long during earlier KMT evacuations to Taiwan. Many weapons were recovered by area villagers and buried. Young managed to obtain several guns, but had no ammunition available except the 30-06 and .30 caliber type. Therefore, hoping to increase the number of useable weapons, he employed Haw Muleteers, who were accomplished blacksmiths, to re-chamber the Mousers. To facilitate the work, an eight by ten-foot gunsmith shop of split woven bamboo walls and grass thatched roof was erected close to the road on the side of the compound closest to town.

Flipse had boyhood aspirations of becoming a gunsmith. He pestered shop owners to sell him their two-dollar junk guns to tear down and learn the parts. After a while, he learned to manufacture springs and other small parts, and knew the different types of steel and how to work them. Therefore, he was fascinated watching the Haw at work and learned techniques he had only read about as a boy.

Chinese equipment was basic, but functional. The ancestral weapon manufacturing technique was an ancient art learned and developed over 2,000 years. Tools consisted of a pair of tongs, a bow drill, files, hammers, chisels, and self-manufactured drill bits. The anvil, a two inch by two-inch piece of steel was set into the end of a log. The forge employed a crude, but time-honored bellows. It consisted of two metal tubes with wadding attached to sticks, much like a cannon swab, but smaller. The sticks were alternately pumped up and down to create a positive draft. With no valves in the system, on the up stroke, the operator cocked the stick sideways for leakage to allow air to

recharge the unit, while the other hand pushed the second stick down. The process was a continuous coordinated motion with both hands alternating up and down. It looked simple to Flipse, but, although he attempted it many times, he could never quite master the correct motion. He was able to create a proper draft, but usually produced a negative pressure and set the swabs on fire while attempting to accumulate air.

The Chinese owned no lathes to bore a barrel, so they improvised. Muzzle loader blanks were purchased at the market and retrofitted with rifling.¹ However, without a rack to properly work the barrels, the rifling was not particularly uniform, although they compensated by customizing their own slugs.

One project the men worked on for more than a month was designing a bolt action rifle capable of firing the readily available .30 caliber ammunition. They began with a piece of crowbar, which was hammered to receiver size. This was laboriously hand drilled for two days and chiseled to create a rough receiver blank. Manufacturing dies and taps as needed, they made a bolt, springs, and the trigger assembly. After stocking, the weapon was declared functional. Despite the talent involved, most of the Haw metal work was soft, as the men did not case harden their weapons.

They also fashioned single-shot fountain pen style hideout guns. Bill Young presented a .45 caliber model to Chao Mai that was so heavy the entire side of his shirt sagged when placed in his pocket. There was also a more practical lighter .22 caliber version. In the early days, Chao Mai always carried his pen when visiting the Bungalow.

¹ Rifling: Cut spiral grooves employed in a barrel to allow a bullet to rotate in order to increase accuracy and distance.

All these adaptations and modifications were performed in the tiny poor man's machine shop with rude tools; it just required time to achieve results.

Because of a lack of air transportation into Houei Sai, Joe had problems going to and from Nam Thouei. Never aware of whether a rare Helio Courier was assigned to work the area, or returning immediately to Site-20, if he heard one across the river, he would hurriedly boat to the bungalow. Then he attempted to call the plane on Young's decrepit VHF radio, which generally only transmitted on the common guard frequency (121.5 megacycles). For this reason, he normally remained with the Thai team at Nam Thouei for several days until receiving air support. The PARU occupied two split bamboo houses, to the left and three quarters of the way to the head of the strip. Using an antiquated hand cranked radio, the team-maintained contact with the radio operator at the bungalow.

At the time, another PARU team was located three hours' walk north at Ban Na Woua. Joe had packed some heavy loads over hills in Germany while still in the Army, but he found that his Yao handlers left him huffing and puffing in the dust. While climbing mountain trails, similar to banjo strings stretched to the maximum, he believed his calf ligaments were going to snap. After arriving at the village, Joe spent the night, and then he and the PARU medic walked a further two hours to a Yao village in the direction of Vieng Phu Kha.

During sick call, Joe observed the most repugnant, but most fascinating sight he ever experienced. A bear had attacked a Yao woman and nearly clawed her entire face from her skull. Hanging like a Halloween mask, but still attached below one ear, the villagers salvaged the remaining portion of her tissues and reattached the mess the best they could. Somehow, the infection was controlled and the unfortunate woman survived the ordeal.

However, her appearance was gruesome, like a lump of dough with holes where normal orifices had been. Joe could not help staring, but was embarrassed to be caught looking at the sight. After spending the night, the visitors retraced their steps south.

If he was fortunate, he might obtain a ride to Ban Houei Sai within three to ten days. Then, as the only American AID/IVS representative present at the river town, he had to complete required paperwork and other necessary items.

YAO DWELLINGS

Flipse's description of Yao houses, accoutrements, and occupants' dress closely paralleled those of the Meo. This is understandable, owing to both cultures' Chinese origin. His observations were formed in refugee villages, as he never stayed in any old established village.

Houses were long and constructed on the ground. Five feet high at the apex, a roof was constructed of half bamboo splits, laid alternately, curve up and curve down. They flowed from eaves to the ridge in one continuous length. Split and spread out bamboo planks formed the walls. Doors made of saggy bamboo that required lifting to swing, were like any other in Laos. A foot high panel was installed into doorframes to prevent hog entry, but enterprising chickens had no problem hopping over the barrier. From Joe's observation, there was no formality involved in entering a Yao house, one just went in.

A cook stove always sat by the side of the door. Fashioned from baked clay, the cooking area was essentially part of the wall rising off the floor and formed into a smaller hole to accommodate pots or steamers. Lacking a chimney, heat and smoke rose through gaps between the pot and stove. Ladies of the house raked cold ashes out a fuel hole in the bottom and then mixed

them with water to form a cake. Then the mixture was wadded into a ball and stuck onto the previous day's leavings for the manufacture of soap. Meat was dried on a bamboo rack over the stove. Seeds were stored above the drying rack. Families used accumulated soot and cobwebs near the roof to treat cuts and abrasions.

Other than a table and sleeping cubicles, a house's interior was open. The table was generally crafted from discarded rice drop pallets, and diners sat on small round bamboo stools common in Laos. Whenever Joe's cook was absent from the site, the old Tasseng, Chao Mai's father-in-law, invited him to dinner. Meals at the chief's house were not fancy, but country style Chinese. Joe found the food good and clean. He never knew anyone who experienced stomach problems after eating Yao food. Using chopsticks, or a spoon for soup, everyone had a separate rice bowl. Ladies served common meat and soup dishes, usually consisting of mustard cabbage, pork, and thin noodles.

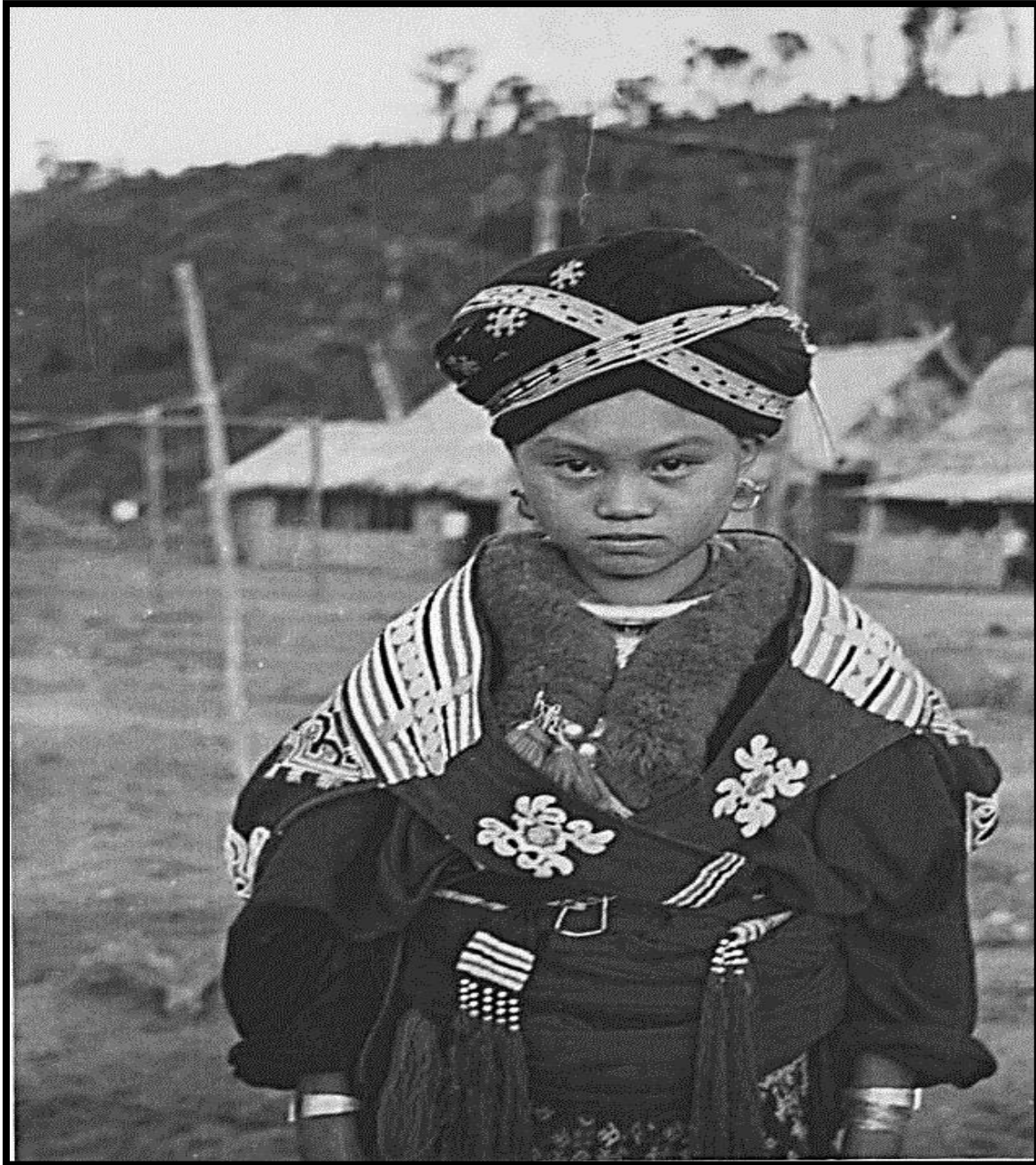
One night during Joe's absence, the chief invited veterinarian Bill Taylor to supper. As customary, the host plied his guests with a couple shots of homemade corn whiskey before eating. The booze was good and enhanced the food taste. However, stored in used five-gallon kerosene tins, the drink always tasted slightly of kerosene. When the food arrived, Taylor stirred a large communal soup bowl. In the dim light from the cooking fire, he thought he saw a baby's hand and shuddered, having visions of cannibalism at the site. Horrified, he kept quiet, but glanced around the table. No one was watching him, so he stirred the mixture once again. The next time the "hand" rose to the surface, he recognized it as a gibbon's paw. He was quite relieved, but abstained from eating soup that night.

Very early in his IVS career, Flipse learned never to ask what was in the food. In the beginning, he was curious, but soon stopped asking questions when the answers were not always appetizing. At first, Lao officials went to great lengths to have fun with the Americans over food. However, after discovering that they were unable to intimidate their guests, especially following a few whiskeys, they ceased their childish games. The Yao never acted like that. They always treated Joe and his compadres like kings.

Yao farmers raised hogs and kept mules used for pack animals. The men were good muleteers, journeying to Nam Nhion to obtain kerosene, cigarettes, candles, matches, and other consumables.

Traditional men's clothing was dark blue with red and white piping on the jacket and button loops. Buttons were hand made from silver. A man might have one or two ornaments, such as a fish, next to a button. The jacket left an area above the waist exposed and buttoned over to the side in double-breasted style. A hollow tube sash, displaying embroidery at either end, secured Chinese style pants. It also doubled as a carry all for personal gear and rice when on the trail. Young male trend-setters hanging around the airstrip wore a white towel around their necks with a toothbrush dangling from one corner. Older men wore the ancient red turban. The younger generation either wore black berets or nothing on their heads. When issued, military brogans three sizes too large curled up in the front and replaced bare feet.

Yao women, in addition to caring for the house and raising babies, performed most outside chores. They planted and tended the opium, corn, and rice crops, and the vegetable gardens. They hauled wood for fires, bamboo stalks for pigs to eat, and creek materials they pulped to manufacture paper used for writing and



Young Yao maiden displaying her finery during New Year.
Flipse Collection.

wrapping opium decks. During late morning, or afternoon after chores, taking advantage of good light, the ladies perched on small stools outside the house embroidering their clothes in various patterns. Duplicating Meo custom, they wore the same suit of clothes for an entire year and at New Year, they donned a new suit.

When needed for a mission, Joe had to request Helio Courier support over Bill Young's high frequency single-side-band radio. If available, a plane was dispatched from either Site-20 or 20-Alternate. The three times he journeyed to Vientiane on business or R&R, required routing through Sam Tong. Occasionally, because of weather or other problems, a RON was necessary and he watched fornicating rats repeatedly climbing the rafters, jumping on the parachute, and sliding to the wall. Another time, he played penny-ante poker with Pop and two H-34 pilots. Regrettably, he lost all his money-one dollar and seventy-three cents.

Always restless and seeking a greater challenge, Joe became proactive in Military Region One air operations. His first drops were with Helio Captain Bob Abrams. He found Bob highly proficient and a lot of fun to work with, as were all the other small plane drivers. Unconcerned with weight, Bob hauled anything the loaders stacked in the machine.

Operating out of Bill Young's area at Chiang Khong, the plane was loaded to drop supplies during a Yao offensive well to the north of Nam Thouei and deep in bad guy country. Thai PARU rigger, Lipo (Boonchan Sirma), normally acted as the kicker on these flights, but Young insisted that Joe perform this duty because he was taller. Lipo, a short, stocky individual, who spoke excellent English, always wore a fancy cap and displayed a broad smile. The smile was noteworthy, for it exposed a gold tooth that filled a previous gap. Joe considered Lipo an asset

to the program, for he was always hustling at the Chiang Khong airstrip while his lazy peers lounged in the team house. ²

As this airdrop marked a new experience for the naive newbie, he foolishly sat in the rear of the plane. With the door removed, and frigid air from the slipstream rushing into the cargo compartment, he suffered greatly. Unschooled at the time, he wasn't aware that he could remove the upright portion of the co-pilot's seat and benefit from the cockpit heater.

The remote drop zone lay in thick jungle between Nam Tha and Mounng Sing. The correct signal was displayed on high ground on the nose of a ridge. The first drop of ammunition cases resulted in a parachute steamer. The second drop, another disappointing steamer. Disregarding the two remaining parachute loads, Joe turned to address the bagged rice for free fall. To perform the drop and remain close to the drop zone, Bob remained low and made steep turns that made it difficult for Joe to stack the rice in the door. While Joe struggled to move the rice, the "G" forces in a turn made a forty-kilogram bag feel like 200. Under those difficult working conditions, he finally accomplished the task and they returned to Chiang Khong.

The crew informed Young about the streamers and after checking the two remaining chute packages, he discovered that Lipo had crossed the cargo straps over the chutes and the hooks to the cargo. It was apparent that the concerned man was never properly trained on how to rig a chute. The problem was rectified and a second drop was successful, but the next day Joe's seldom used stomach muscles were very sore.

Yao leaders attempted to decide how to proceed with the projected attack on a Pathet Lao ammunition dump without the critical small arms ammunition lost in the airdrop. Despite the

² Later, Lipo played a prominent role in Military Region Two, and positively interacted many times with the Author.

deficiency, the leader, Chao La (baby prince), younger brother of Chao Mai (new prince) then at Nam Thouei, elected to continue with the plan. When Chao La's troops had the enemy target bore sighted, the defective 57mm recoilless rifle failed to fire. The botched operation, caused by an indifferent PARU arms specialist, resulted in losses to the Yao force. An incensed Chao La blamed his problems and the fiasco on support, and threatened to walk out of the enemy-controlled area.

The policy at the time was tailored to maintain friendly assets in place. Therefore, the disgruntled leader's threat fostered many meetings and parties at Nam Thouei and Bill Young's Chiang Khong bungalow. Despite all attempts to prevent Yao withdrawal, after two weeks, Chao La and his people departed their northern positions for Site-118, and then on to Ban Nam Kheung on the banks of the Mekong River. Assuming the status of refugees, for years the troops received Agency pay and AID rice without participating in hostilities. More than a few Customers believed Chao La was the wisest person in the program, one who always found an excuse to avoid the conflict and sit on his hands.

BAN POUNG

Sometime later, the RLG planned to recapture the hamlet of Ban Pong, located only thirteen-miles north of Ban Houei Sai at a Route-3 crossroads. Held by a small Pathet Lao force since the loss of Nam Tha, there had been no urgent reason or previous attempt by the government to capture the site because of the remote possibility that the Accords would work. Actually, the few Pathet Lao there were never a real threat to the Lao Army, but no one ever had any illusions about the Vietnamese capability to roll over Ban Houei Sai any time they desired. However, it was believed that after the Geneva Accords signing,

the enemy had little more to gain by proceeding farther down the road, for they already held Nam Tha, Moung Sing, and areas close to the Nam Tha River. All they could achieve by moving on Houei Sai was adverse Thai publicity, Southeast Asia Treaty Organization censure, and perhaps a tangible response from the U.S. In addition, there might have been a tacit understanding over possession of real estate like the bilateral one in the Attoupeu region.

At some point, it became obvious to both Westerners and the right-leaning Lao government that the policy of quasi-neutrality had failed. Therefore, planners realized that a gentle shove was necessary to stimulate the reluctant Lao Army into action. The goal was modest, as evidenced by the limited offensive, but constituted an initial step in northwestern Military Region One to restore a theoretical demarcation line existing at the time of the Accords.

There was no tactical or strategic reason to attack Ban Pong other than that the under-strength Pathet Lao unit presented an excellent target. The two-pronged plan was simple, calculated to instill confidence in the troops in future actions. BV-18 (only consisting of one hundred actual men, but 400 to 500 phantoms on pay-day) would proceed up Route-3 from the river. Colonel Thanom had recently replaced the flamboyant Colonel Kong Kao in the FAR battalion, and the operation would mark the first of his command. The Yao, armed, trained, and "loaded for bear," would move stealthily overland from Nam Thoui and attack from the west. The action would utilize only small arms. Everyone moved out on schedule.

Joe reached Nam Thoui in the morning and inquired from Chao Mai if his Yao troops were equipped with battle dressings. When the leader responded in the negative, Flipse returned to Ban Houei Sai and forwarded a priority message to the Vientiane

Public Health Department for one hundred battle dressings. As it was Sunday, when most workers were out and about, he believed his effort was a waste of time, so he returned to VS-118.

He was surprised when the designated Helio landed at Nam Thouei that afternoon with bandages. The supplies and passengers arrived after a circuitous route. Emulating the support Joe expected from Doctor Weldon, "Jiggs" personally carried the articles from Sam Tong to a PSP strip at Ban Satan, five miles south of Chiang Khong. Bill Young had used this former RTAF landing strip after the Accords signing as an intermediary staging area to clandestinely provide supplies to his teams across the river. However, the low-lying airfield proved too slippery and swampy during the rainy season, and many large planes mired in thick mud while offloading cargo. For this reason, it became largely unused and another strip was later created closer to Chiang Khong. BHS's IVS representative Mike Cunningham met the inbound Helio Courier and directed the transfer to the proper location. Chao Mai immediately sent a runner with the bandages after the troops, and the medical items arrived in time to be of some benefit.

Firmly in position, Yao troops commenced the attack. However, the easy victory envisioned by friendly parties failed to materialize, for BV-18 failed to participate in the action. Instead, they remained in the woods watching the fighting. After the Yao seized the objective at the cost of eight men, Lao troops moved forward to occupy Ban Pong. They rounded up prisoners and marched them back to Ban Houei Sai. To impress the villagers with their prowess, they displayed prisoners and captured weapons at the fort.

At Nam Thouei, sad villagers attended funerals. Talking to Bill Young after the action, Colonel Thanom quipped, "*Colonel Tip, it really smells bad at Ban Pong.*" When Bill inquired why,

the commanding officer replied with a typical biased mindset, *"Because of all those dead Yao soldiers."*

During a conventional battle, an equal number of Yao casualties would normally be sustained in such a frontal attack across open terrain, but this warfare was different and the tribals could ill afford such losses at the beginning of their first effort. However, the incident reconfirmed a lack of support and shabby treatment they had received from the Lao in the past. Therefore, Yao leaders concerned themselves more with Lao treachery than their casualties. In the future, the Yao were very careful while working with their Lao "allies." They maintained teams in locations and secured areas, but after the Ban Pong offensive, relations were never the same with their Lao counterparts.

The minor Ban Pong offensive marked the gradual beginning of a larger movement back into the hinterland north of Ban Houei Sai. During operations calculated to reclaim locations where the PL cached arms and ammunition, Lao Theung troops, led by Khamsene, later moved overland northeast from Site-118 to take Ta Fa and Vieng Phu Kha.

PROBLEMS WITH THE PARU

Festering for a considerable time, Thai-Yao problems, some caused by Thai pressure on Bill Young, the often-resented "farang Thai," came to a head. After losing face, PARU were temporarily removed from Nam Thouei in the early winter and did not return until Case Officer O'Jibway took charge of the northwestern project later the following year.

When originally placed at the site to train and supervise the tribals, the PARU believed that they were in total charge of all affairs. Consequently, they never consulted Chao Mai regarding civilian matters, but imperialistically issued orders

and expected them to be followed to the letter. Responsible for the team's performance, Young was more aware of the increasing tension and foul-ups than Flipse, who only worked with the medics. He did note that the medic at the time was strict when dispensing medicine, and would not use Pop's trained Yao medics.

Joe remained with the team until Thai-Yao relations in the valley began to seriously deteriorate, and then spent his nights at Ban Houei Sai. Late one afternoon, Young radioed Flipse that a plane was inbound to ferry the two of them to Nam Thouei. Joe thought this unusual, because Young rarely flew into Laos after the accident with Smith, and never at night. The Geneva Accords also legally restricted him to the Thai side of the river. Details for the visit were murky. However, Joe learned from Bill that an incident involving the Thai medic had just occurred at the site, after which Yao soldiers surrounded the Thai team and, under the threat of death, demanded an apology for a real or imaginary slight.

They disembarked at dusk and the pilot departed. On the way to Chao Mai's house, located on the right side of the runway, they heard a commotion and the sound of breaking glass across the strip in the direction of the PARU housing area. Young was livid with anger and cursed the Thai. Once in the leader's house, they had a few kerosene formalities, while Joe, with his limited knowledge of Lao, attempted to follow the conversation. Finally, the agitated Thai staggered into the room, either out of uniform or wearing civvies. Joe did not recognize two of the men and assumed a new team had rotated to the site. Glaring, they sat opposite Young, Chao Mai, and Joe. Joe was nervous, sure the situation was going to become rough, so he eased his pistol from his holster and cocked it under the table. At this point, he was not interested in international relations, just departing the acrimonious pow wow in one piece.

As the conversation increasingly heated and drifted in and out of Thai, Joe gave up trying to follow the subject matter, but he easily read the raw emotions displayed on the principals' faces. He considered the confrontation unsurpassed in rancor among any he had ever witnessed between Asians. With no British stiff upper lip, they went at each other Anglo-Saxon style. That night, he discovered that the normally mild-mannered Chao Mai was no shrinking violet. Having a temper when aroused, he jumped up and down with the rest.

Following a half hour of unfriendly accusations, the vocal combatants ran out of steam. The emotional Thai were so wound up that they eventually broke down in tears and admitted they were wrong. They promised to a man not to repeat their transgressions. Not a people easily pushed around, the Yao leader Chao Mai and his followers were vindicated in their actions that day.

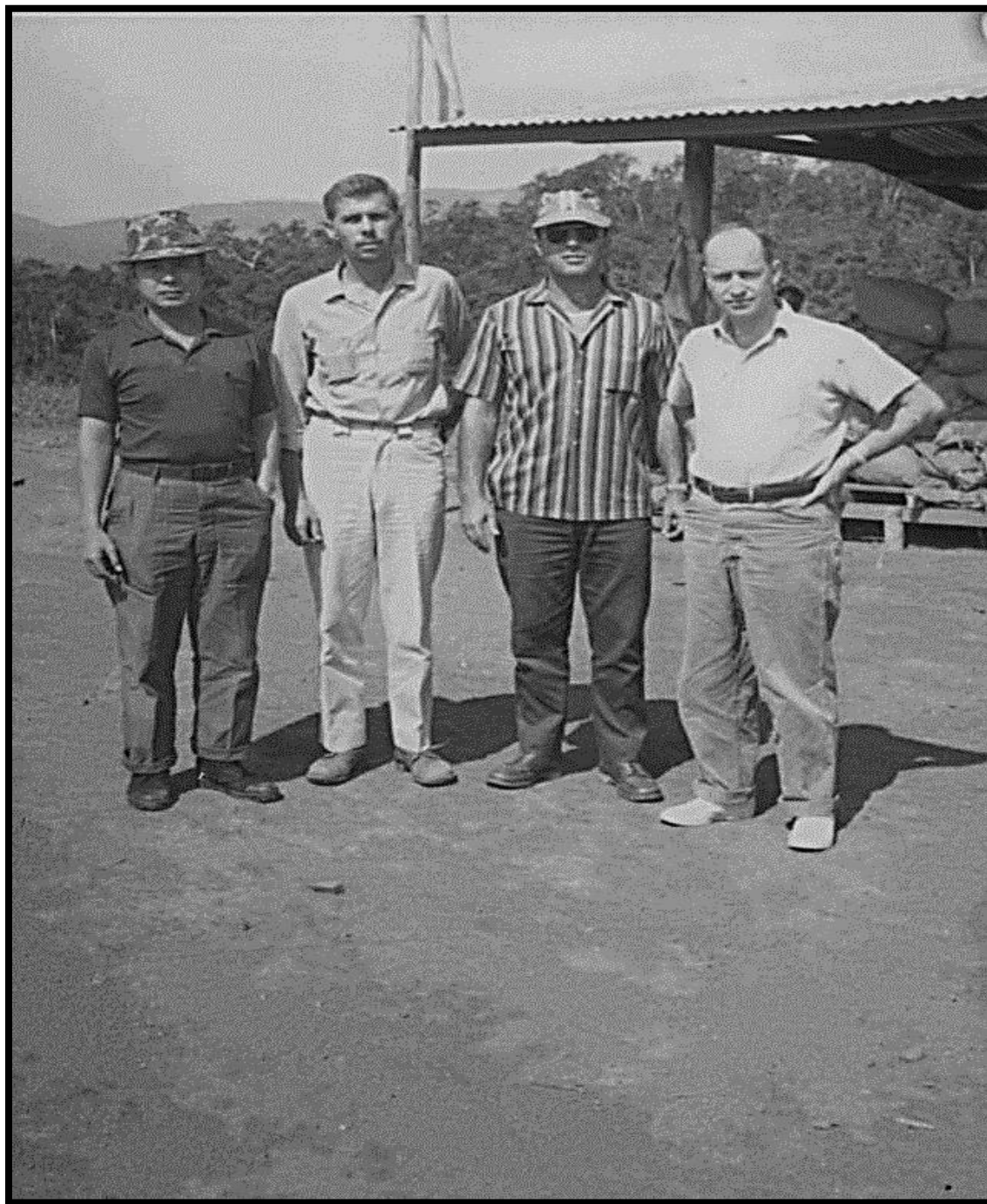
Several high-level meetings that Joe did not attend were held later at the bungalow. There was substantial finger pointing at Young as the culprit. Eventually, in a face-saving gesture, the team was quietly removed from Site-118. Because of Young's superior language capability, particularly with the Lahu, his ability to probe and thoroughly comprehend the Thai psyche, and also his leadership capabilities among the tribals, the incident marked the beginning of a downward spiral in Bill's relationship with Thai military leaders. Unlike their ability to easily manipulate other Americans not raised in the country, resentful members of the Thai Army and PARU assigned to northwestern Laos were unable to impose their will on the people in all situations within Young's region.

The Thai may have envisioned Young and his Lao program as a distinct threat to the entire northern Thai area, and did not want him to be successful in his endeavors. Geopolitical border

considerations were at the core of the problem and a few PARU team members ejected from the Lao program never were an overriding issue. The Thai may have considered Young the latent instrument of a nefarious USG plot to gain control in the area. A well-functioning Sky (a specific term for CIA Laos) program could well disrupt KMT-Thai economic and insurgency control within the Shan States. This in turn would allow men and materiel to bypass Thailand from the east through Laos.

Another theory proffered that the growing problem might not have entirely related to Thai insensitivity regarding ethnic groups, but rather to Thai government political agendas in the "Golden Triangle" area. Opium was only a small portion of the larger economic-security-political problem. Government leaders wanted to hurriedly establish as much control as possible within the tri-border region, for other problems were occurring in several border areas. Different ethnic cultures and tribal goals constituted a major factor in this reasoning. If the Thai government could manage to keep everyone fighting among themselves, they could control some factions and use them against others. This was an efficient and very inexpensive defense policy that worked in the past with the Chinese. Thai leaders had been playing these political games successfully with the British and French for years, which resulted in Thailand being the only Southeast Asian country never colonized. The methods also smacked of pure Machiavellian tactics, for which the Thai were past masters.

The narrow-minded government in Bangkok was not going to change. Instead, tribal communities would have to conform to government policy. At first, Bangkok military leaders erroneously believed that a couple of privates assigned to a village would largely contain the problems, but it only created additional trouble. The young men only made matters worse by



Rice loading shack at Ban Houei Sai. Left to right: Thai official, IVS worker Joe Flipse, Agency Case Officer Bill Young, and unidentified USAID personnel.

Flipse Collection.

experimenting with the evils of opium and fooling with the local girls. This became a general dilemma in all Thai border projects, while at some time Thai authorities may have rationalized that Bill Young was intent on usurping their program.

The arrival of airplanes at Nam Thouei in the early days was a large social occasion. While children chased mules off the strip, a majority of the villagers turned out for the show. Some organization was visible and the tail wash dirt the people inhaled was considered just part of the overall festivities. Furthermore, no thought was given to the consequences of the man with tuberculosis who constantly spat on the ground, while propeller wash spread infectious germs everywhere.

During the dry season before the PARU team was pulled out of Site-118, Jack Kemp delivered newly-trained team leaders from Hua Hin in the twin-engine Bird Pioneer. Their arrival was tailored to commence the team program, and the kids just having graduated were motivated and looked exceptional.

Shuttles were planned to move supplies across the river from T-516, and Joe honchoed the operation. Since the Nam Thouei strip was short, Jack worked at minimum fuel. After each roundtrip, the plane was shut down and fueled using a five-gallon bucket and tie down strap. Kemp, a large man, pulled the bucket up to the overhead wing and poured the liquid through a chamois covered funnel inserted in the fuel port.

During rollout after the second trip, the right gear sank into an old termite mound hidden just beneath the surface. In an all-hands effort, a dirt ramp was dug in front of the gear. Then a wooden pallet was inserted under the wheel for traction and a long strap attached to and pulled taut in front of the strut. While Kemp ran up the right engine and stomped on the left brake, a multitude of villagers were instructed to pull on the

strap, while others were positioned to push on the fuselage from the other side. As the plane slowly rolled out of the hole, all participants present cheered wildly at the successful extraction. It was the last time the Pioneer was used in the area for about two years. ³

³ Joe Flipse Emails, 04/14/97, 05/04/97, 05/07/97, 05/08/97 (2), 05/10//97, 05/22/97, 05/23/97, 05/24/97, 05/25/97, 05/26/97, 05/28/97, 05/30/97, 06/07/97, 06/09/97, 06/10/97, 06/11/97, 06/28/97, 01/24/99.

During an extended period off the flight schedule, I rejected Bangkok STO and elected to remain in Udorn. Mainly, I considered trips to the big city far too expensive for my efforts to save money--the primary reason for my Air America employment. Besides, I had everything required at Sopa Villa. To further curtail expenditures, Sang offered to perform Sang La's job, one that required a minimum effort. Perhaps she was becoming tired of sniveling children or sought to solidify a female control over the house. I did learn that she had a young son and expected he would soon become part of my household. Whatever the reason, I reluctantly discharged Sang La to keep the peace. After working for Americans for a year, she had sufficient experience to seek another job. In addition, her husband was again producing income, and she indicated that I could recall her if needed.

Changing Thai maids was a frequent occurrence within the American community. When I commented on letting Sang La go, Deanie confessed to discharging one about every other week. She was unable to recall how many she had hired after arriving in Southeast Asia indicating that it was similar to living in Germany. I guess she was indeed a difficult person to please.

JUSMAG

We were still flying Bangkok JUSMAG Thai contract missions, but now other more senior individuals shared the duty. Assigned to work there for the month of October, Wayne Knight and Lai arranged to rent a furnished apartment over the Keynote restaurant on Patpong Road for three weeks. Beginning on the first, he considered his missions diverse, interesting, and an educational way to see Thailand. During the period, fuel had

been pre-positioned at two locations, but he mainly used airfield facilities. For convenience, loading personnel was still performed at Lumpini Park. His first mission took him to Lop Buri and further north, with a programmed stop at Takhli for juice.

The following day, he ferried former MAAG Laos Commanding Officer General Rubin Tucker and other senior officers again to Lop Buri to conduct recurrent parachute qualification.

Much to Knight's delight, one of the officers was Colonel Pat Marr. Wayne had previously worked for the then-popular Major Marr at Luang Prabang, where Marr headed the White Star detachment. Now stationed in Bangkok, he functioned as a designated jumpmaster. Several military ladies were also along on the junket. Before takeoff, Pat informed Wayne that the desk jockeys were on a lark trying to impress the girls with their jumping prowess. Recalling the insects-in-the-tree incident, Wayne considered Pat a lot of fun. Always primed for a prank, this mission would provide him a chance to excel. To avoid thermals, jumps were planned for early morning. Experiencing torrential rain during the night, most of the Lop Buri area was very wet. Tucker liked to act as the wind dummy on the first run, so, using discretion, Pat jumped the General over dry land. However, for the others, the direction he vectored Wayne took the helicopter over a virtual swamp, where he gave the jump signal to those remaining onboard. As planned, they all landed in mud. None had brought clean dry clothes, so they muddled sloppily around the rest of the day, not exactly impressing the young ladies. Pat was ecstatic over his trick, and later, on several occasions while enjoying beers, laughed with Wayne about the episode.

Later during his JUSMAG work, a mission took Wayne and Joe Marlin east to Ubon, where they RON two nights. Among sites

visited in the local area was Chong Mek, the road leading to the Pakse ferry, located west on Route-217. A Border Police-Special Forces camp was located in this area, where Red Alston, Mike Marshall, and Bill Cook had staged to extract an agent during a clandestine night mission into the Saravane area in the late fall of 1962. Moving north, they landed at Ban Dan at the confluence of the Nam Mun and Mekong rivers and another river town, Khemmarat, a town for which the Mekong rapids were named.

The following day took them to Mukdahan across the river from Savannakhet, the town where I had visited and met the provincial governor while still in the Marine Corps. Working their way up river to That Phanom, they RON at Nakhon Phanom town. The four-day mission ended at Udorn on the tenth. ¹

While Wayne switched from Hotel-15 to Hotel-14--a ship Viril Black and I tested on the ninth--and returned to Bangkok, Jerry McEntee and I conducted a twenty-minute familiarization in recently designated Hotel-16, one of the three Coast Guard "G" models. ² As I suspected, the accustomed feel of the Marine H-34 throttle was replaced by a new sensitivity that required constant monitoring of the tachometer gage during takeoff and landing. The tiniest squeeze resulted in an instantaneous 100 to 200 RPM change, something that could be dangerous during a critical situation, and would greatly increase a pilot's workload at exactly the wrong time during an approach to a high mountain site. I did not like it, and envisioned a potential problem for some pilots. When mentioned this to Jerry, he informed me that we would have to live with the touchy throttle

¹ EW Knight Emails, 06/03/00, 02/06/01, 02/08/01, 02/10/01, 02/12/01.

² Jerry McEntee was one of three-line pilots assigned to assist the CPH with test and training flights.

until maintenance elected to retrofit the system to a standard configuration during a major overhaul.

Part of the throttle problem was resolved when Operations sent Hotels-16 and 17 to work in the low demand Bangkok areas, which allowed more senior pilots to gain experience with the new system.

DAN ALSTON TRANSFERS TO BANGKOK

When helicopter flight time significantly decreased, Dan "Red" Alston requested transfer to the fixed wing program. By late October, his wish was granted and he found himself permanently assigned to the new Ten-Two twin-engine Beechcraft program in Bangkok. Jack Rife, described as a crude but likeable person, served as the operation's chief pilot.

People recalled Jack as a memorable character. Hugh Grundy's favorite pilot, he always flew the President during his Southeast Asian visits. Jack had grown up in the metropolis of Turkey Creek, Kentucky, deep in the heart of tobacco country. Grundy had also grown tobacco in Virginia. Because of similar origins, the two favored each other, but it really was Jack's great sense of humor, huge store of jokes, and natural talent to entertain that cemented their friendship.

Adding to his colorful stories, before inception of the Volpar program, when Jack worked in Laos, his survival pack dropped from a rear seat and the weapon inside discharged. The round struck the pilot in the back but, despite the serious wound, he safely landed the aircraft. In later years, attempting something entirely new in Bangkok, Rife initiated a telephone book yellow pages subscription.

During the training period, Alston went to Taipei to retrieve a plane. While there, he talked to Abadie. Following a period of operations, Rife decided that since he was Chief

Pilot, and those in his exalted position did not fly, "Red" should exclusively fly the plane.

Engineers and mechanics refitted the airframe from the ancient C-45.³ Designed with both tricycle landing gear and new efficient engines, "Red" found it a good aircraft. However, while flying a drop mission around Chiang Mai, he discovered a serious flaw in the redesign: the installation of a large door in the fuselage. When kickers opened the door preparing to discharge drop bundles, a heavy vibration occurred.

Restricted to flying only CIA and embassy personnel, Alston was not permitted to fly Air America personnel. A 0430 pickup, the long drive to the Don Muang, and flight to the Chiang Mai-Chiang Rai areas, created very long days. He frequently flew to a border police camp in the northern hills with a gravel runway that kicked up small stones when he applied brakes. After parking, he sat in the hot sun the entire day until the passengers returned at sundown. Breaking the monotony of the long waits, the mess hall cook prepared delicious fish lunches for those present.

In opting for the job, "Red" forgot the admonition "to be careful what you wish for." Before long, he discovered himself locked into an unrewarding, boring job that paid little money and failed to cover all his and Jane's Bangkok expenses. Finally, he composed a letter to the VPFO Taipei complaining about the meager Beech program remuneration. Since leaving the H-34 program, he estimated a loss of 3,000 dollars in wages. He reminded the VPFO that he possessed an airline transport rating and other credentials most other pilots lacked. He also said that because Rife was not flying, he represented the only active Ten-Two Captain, and in case that he became sick, Operations

³ Known in the U.S. Navy as the SNB we called the "secret Navy bomber."

would have to ground the C-47 and tap Captain Red Fredricks to fly the Beech. Alston discovered that he could not send the letter through normal Company channels, but the Mandarin Jet Captain could back channel it by going through Hugh Grundy and then the VPFO. The ground shook when they read what Alston wrote, but he ultimately received compensation of 3,200 dollars.

Early in 1964 Alston decided to leave Air America, and informed Regional Chief Pilot Fred Walker that he was leaving by 1 April. He forwarded the paperwork to the head shed, and as the target date approached, he was informed that he had to journey to Taipei for a release from Bangkok. However, at the Air America Patpong office the personnel clerk informed him that he would have to obtain tickets for the Taipei trip, and that Captain Walker would have to authorize this. He found Fred drinking beer with a few fixed wing cronies at the Plaza Hotel bar. He asked Fred for clearance to depart Southeast Asia adding that he had forwarded the paperwork a month before. Fred indicated he had a letter relating to the matter, and that he had informed Taipei headquarters that Alston would remain on the job another thirty days. Upset, Alston countered that he had never agreed to this. As tension mounted between the men, all the pilots at the table began giggling nervously. Again, "Red" asked if he could leave as planned. Walker was firm, reiterating that since he had already informed the Company, that he would remain the full thirty days, "Red" had to stay for this period. He was then laughed out of the bar.

Alston lived within walking distance of the Plaza at Tom and Jerry's, an apartment complex owned and occupied by Air America pilots. When he reported to Jane what had occurred, she asked his intentions. He thought awhile and admitted that he did not know. Then, out of habit, he called the Operations Department. When Operations informed him of a mission the

following morning with a 0430 bus pickup, "Red" quickly refused the mission.

The clerk inquired, "Are you sick?"

"No. I am just not going to fly for Walker anymore."

"Does Captain Walker know about this?"

"No. Why don't you call and tell him." Ten minutes later the phone rang.

"Red" this is Fred."

Before Walker had an opportunity to coax Alston into staying, "Red" said, "No thank you Fred. I'll just sit here at the apartment until my termination date arrives."

Red Alston received immediate clearance out of Bangkok. ⁴

⁴ Dan Alston Interview, 09/22/99.

Meo forces continued expanding operations and consolidating territory north of the Ban Ban valley, particularly around Houei Sa An (VS-23), a site reoccupied in August. During October, while landing late in the day in the hills along Route-6 east of Bouam Long, Howard Estes rolled over a small mine, which exploded and damaged a portion of the helicopter tail wheel assembly. Uncertain about continuing to operate, as a precaution he returned to Sam Tong. Checking with Udorn, he learned that maintenance estimated a two-day delay to obtain, deliver, and repair the affected part. Therefore, as time was money, and RONs limited, he unilaterally opted to disregard any damage and fly the wounded machine the next two days.

The day following Estes' encounter with the mine, Dick Crafts and Tony Poe experienced a similar event. However, this time the consequences were considerably more serious. Crafts landed in the same area as Estes when a careless soldier, while digging a mine out of the road, set off a "Bouncing Betty", killing or injuring seventeen troops and civilians in the area. Tony was in the process of leaping from the cabin door at the time of the detonation. Suffering a gut wound, and unsure of the explosion's cause, he hit the deck. Observing leaking fuel tanks and fearing fire or another explosion, he yelled for Crafts to depart the area.

Crafts was still in the cockpit preparing to secure the helicopter when flying shrapnel grazed his right thigh. Unaware of the actual cause of the blast, in response to Tony's order, he immediately "pulled pitch" and departed for Bouam Long. En route, he radioed Dick Elder and Don Buxton who were in the area, and reported losing fuel at an alarming rate. After

landing, the Flight Mechanic ascertained that a chunk of metal had nearly severed the main fuel line. Shortly thereafter Buxton touched down at the site and ferried Tony and the wounded personnel to Sam Tong.

At the time of the incident, Doctor Weldon was enjoying lunch with Kong Le and his doctor at the FAN headquarters on the Plain of Jars when a Helio Courier pilot landed and breathlessly informed Jiggs that Tony was badly wounded. They went to Site-88, but discovered that both men had already been evacuated south. They then flew to Udorn, where Jiggs determined that Tony was not seriously wounded with life-threatening injuries. He did not see Crafts.

Both men were med-evaced to the Seventh Day Adventist Hospital in Bangkok. Dick's minor injury allowed him to depart the hospital after a day. Before being released, he asked Tony if he needed anything. Ever the comedian, the former Marine indicated, *"Well, if you really want to do something for me, you can bring me a jug of whiskey and a "turkey-gobbler."* That evening Dick faithfully returned to the hospital with a bottle of booze and a young working lady. ¹

¹ Charles Weldon Email, 01/30/97.
Howard Estes Phone Call, 02/16/96.
Dan Alston Interview, 09/22/99.
Dick Elder Response to Author's Letter, 08/09/91.
Tony Poe Phone Call, 04/03/93.
Tom Ahern, 140 FN 22.

During early July, International Voluntary Service volunteer (IVS) Blaine Jensen arrived in Vientiane. The Idaho State graduate roomed with fellow IVS worker Brian O'Connor during a short familiarization process. The organization sent him to Luang Prabang for about three months, where his days were consumed with many tasks. Blaine taught English at the college part of the day and trained his students in animal husbandry with pigs and agricultural techniques and vegetable gardens the rest. During weekends, he helped King Savang Vatthana improve his farm, which was located twenty-minutes north of the royal capital by car. These efforts allowed him personal access to the King and his son, the Crown Prince Vong Savang. He considered the latter a pleasant young man, well educated, sharp, and one who really cared about his people.

Since Prince Souphannouvong sprang from Royal lineage, Pathet Lao soldiers and officials were both tolerated and welcomed in Luang Prabang. City fathers allocated two bars and a hostel for leftist visitors. Supplies were openly purchased in town. Top officials were always invited and mixed with AID workers at Royal Palace functions.

The Royal Capital was still considered a small town. With a marginal airstrip for C-47 operation, and surrounded by mountains, planes were limited in payload when departing. The Lao wanted to extend the runway for the Lao King's coronation, but the treasury contained little money for such a project. As the landing strip at Luang Prabang afforded little strategic military importance at this time, USG refused to improve it.

At the time, only three American workers--John McClain, Blyhe Debrissay, and Duane Hammer--lived in houses. The

remaining four AID/IVS workers lived two to a room on the USAID office's second floor.

Blaine observed a large demand for decent housing. Similar to what was occurring in Vientiane, after borrowing money, a Lao could build a large house and with the considerable rent charged, he could pay for the structure in a year and then build another. Jensen saw logic and profit in the practice, and planned to do the same with a Lao counterpart. However, he rejected the scheme when informed by superiors that American participation in such an enterprise represented a USG conflict of interest, and that he would forfeit his job if he pursued it.

TO THE PDJ

After deciding it to be prohibitively expensive to deliver fruit and fresh vegetables daily to Kong Le's troops, who were located at a temporary strip unable to accommodate anything larger than a STOL C-7 Caribou plane, AID chief Charlie Mann elected to send IVS worker Blaine Jensen north to the Plain of jars. (The strip was never assigned a site number.) Designed as a cost-cutting measure, Blaine was charged with instructing Neutralist soldiers in efficient vegetable garden planting techniques. The experience proved not only exciting, but provided him valuable first-hand insights into the Lao situation.

During early October, Blaine and his immediate boss departed Vientiane on a Bird Air Dornier. They landed on the extreme western edge of the Plain, east of the first road junction and a few miles east of Ban Khay, but south of the Route-4 Moung Soui-Xieng Khouang Ville Road. The strip was oriented generally northeast-southwest. A small hill was located directly west and the terrain dropped sharply at the south end of the strip toward a small stream below. Constructed for two

reasons, the new strip afforded a last-ditch defensive position for the Neutralist Army on the Plain, and a forward outpost for Moung Soui's defense. (Future events involved both purposes.) Kong Le was not present when they disembarked, so, after introducing Jensen to the local commanding officer, the honcho left Blaine and returned to his accustomed creature comforts in Vientiane.

The second day, Blaine was driven to the tank park at Moung Phanh to deliver vegetable seeds. Although not Kong Le's headquarters, Blaine met the diminutive commanding officer, who arranged transportation to show the IVS worker around the area. Blaine had heard stories about the ancient stone jars for which the Plain of Jars was named. Because roving enemy patrols prevented access to them at the time, as an alternative, Blaine asked if he could view Xieng Khouang Ville. He received an affirmative, but only from a distance. As a precaution, they placed him in a Soviet PT-76 tank and drove within a safe distance.

After a couple of days, Blaine learned that no FAR troops were located at the site. The soldiers informed him that the third officer in the chain of command was considered a Pathet Lao sympathizer, and they did not trust him. This seemed to be corroborated by the man's cool and standoffish demeanor toward the American. Blaine also assumed that there were other such individuals in the ranks.

During the late afternoon of his fifth day on the Plain of Jars, enemy units converged on and attacked the site. Braving small arms fire and with incoming rounds impacting the area, Bird Captain Eldon Walker landed in a triple tail Pioneer plane, carrying a final load of ammunition and mortar shells. While kickers hastily discharged the load, Blaine dashed to the plane carrying his bug out bag and entered the cargo compartment,

asking the pilot to take him out of there, anywhere away from that hell. Well aimed mortar rounds tracked the plane down the strip as it struggled to become airborne.

Eldon's flight path took them safely over MOUNG SOUI, where Blaine observed his first white ICC helicopter sitting on the deck. After explaining the ICC function in Laos, Eldon asked what Blaine was doing on the Plain.^{1 2}

While en route south, Eldon stated that he was low on fuel, but, for security purposes, he was not cleared to take Blaine, an IVS man, into Long Tieng. As an alternative, he would drop him at the less sensitive Sam Tong, where he certainly could arrange a ride to Vientiane on a late returning Helio Courier.

The reception they received at Sam Tong was entirely unexpected. Buell was furious that Eldon had landed unannounced on his turf with an unvetted visitor. The ration of sierra proved too much for Eldon, who left directly for Long Tieng. Then Pop turned to Blaine, and using salty language angrily demanded to know where the hell Blaine came from and what the hell he was doing at his location. Blaine patiently explained the circumstances, and after nearly convincing Buell as to his bona fides, was allowed Helio Courier transportation to Vientiane that evening.

Ironically, a few days later, Blaine's superior told him to prepare for a trip to Sam Tong to assist Brian O'Connor, another

¹ Lao Crises, 490.

During spring fighting, an ICC team was sent to the western Plain of Jars to investigate allegations of foreign military presence. Envisioned as a temporary move, the team remained and probably helped stem Pathet Lao attacks on Neutralist forces located there.

² According to Blaine Jensen, he and Eldon Walker worked together in both Military Region Two and Ban Houei Sai for many years, and were good friends until Eldon's death. However, Eldon never fully believed Blaine's story about why he was on the Plain of Jars that day, indicating it was the "best damn cover story he ever heard."

IVS volunteer on site since 30 September, in building a school. He was scheduled to leave for Sam Tong on the 14th, but because of a breakdown in communications, sat at the Air America area for two days before the snafu was rectified.

On the way to Site-20 an incident occurred that warranted Blaine a combat badge. While dropping propaganda leaflets to a borderline village well south of Sam Tong with Helio Courier pilot Al Rich, gunfire erupted. The unfriendly gesture attested to the fact that many of the area's inhabitants were still anti-government Pathet Lao sympathizers, or merely wanted everyone to leave them to their own pursuits. At Sam Tong, Al discovered two hits in the tail section.

Supervising school construction, Pop insisted that the school be completed and ready for classes within a month. It was completed on time, but the opening was delayed until the teachers' houses were finished. Brian worked with the teachers because he spoke better Lao, and Blaine began running the warehouse. Both taught English to the locals at night.

When Jensen arrived at Sam Tong, the Agency still supported a majority of the Sam Tong operation. Supplementing the activity, Pop received private donations from IVS and other connections in America. At the time, the chairman of the IVS board was a well-known, well-respected man, with many contacts throughout USG, the voluntary agencies, the churches, and big business. He arranged most funding and donations of items that ended up at Sam Tong, while USAID assumed shipping costs. ³

³Blaine Jensen Letters, #2, 03/02/96, 03/17/96, 08/27/98, #35, 10/04/98, 10/24/96.
MacAllen Thompson Emails, 01/27/97, 02/23/97.
Biographic Register of the U.S. Foreign Service-also called the "Stud Book."

Milt Olsen drove me to Sam Tong in aluminum-colored Helio Courier B-843. One advantage of flying with someone I knew, like "Uncle Milty," was that he let me manipulate the control yoke and fly a little. Passively observing another perform cockpit duties was beneficial from a procedural aspect, but there was no substitute for actual hands-on flying to afford someone a real feel for an aircraft.

Flights in the Helio Courier always provided insight into the fragility of the machine and the difficulty of landing on poor mountain strips. Because of the strip's uphill slope, the fixed wing driver always approached Sam Tong from the southeast. A substantial drop off at the approach end gave one pause to consider the consequences should an engine fail on short final. However, Olsen was an accomplished Helio pilot by then, and he expertly plunked the tail dragger onto the dry strip.

I flew Hotel-12 for a short time and discovered that the machine had another out-of-rig throttle problem in addition to heavy vibrations. It had been working upcountry for some time and was almost due a hundred-hour inspection, so, after consulting with old Punz, who indicated that he could not repair the ship, I called Udorn to receive permission to bring the machine home. Captain Bill Cook accompanied me, and I wondered how he and others had managed to bully the aircraft around for several days in that condition. I also wondered who in maintenance had improperly rigged the throttles, and who had tested the machine.

THE ENEMY REACTS

The next day I arrived at Sam Tong in Hotel-14 to find a substantial refugee evacuation underway. I had hauled refugees before, some as recently as September, but nothing like the numbers I relocated while flying maximum hours during the five-day RON. In what became standard operating procedure (SOP) for future operations, because of the emergency, Customers disregarded all thoughts of funding and restraining helicopter flight time. Over the years, I found that adversity tended to increase helicopter flying. Trading on others' adversity seemed a sick, unpleasant fact, but in helicopter aviation it was a fact of life.

Vang Pao's bee and hornet unit attacks had severely stung the communist bear along Route-7 and Ban Ban areas in August. Therefore, previous to termination of the rainy season, roiled enemy leaders uncharacteristically reacted by ordering troop units from the Plain of Jars lowlands into mountainous areas with the objective of the Tha Lin Noi base. Then, if the Site-18 western flank were lost, the enemy would surely move farther east to harass and challenge entrenched guerrilla enclaves in the hills parallel to Route-7.

That such an enemy operation was even considered and mounted during the normally quiescent wet season attested to the fact that Agency and Meo efforts were working to destabilize logistic movements from North Vietnam.

The 1963 push by enemy forces to gain territory was two-fold: First, Meo guerrilla fighters had become a thorn in the side of the North Vietnamese supply effort. Second, at the time of the two Geneva Accords signings, an artificial imaginary boundary was drawn along the entire length of Laos. All signatories agreed to three designations, showing the areas of control belonging to the Pathet Lao, the Neutralists, and the

RLG. The theoretical line showed all of Sam Neua province and much of Xieng Khouang under Pathet Lao control. Many Westerners believed that should there ever be a true Lao ceasefire, Pathet Lao leaders could not afford to allow a RLG presence in both these provinces. In fact, the hereditary governor of Xieng Khouang Province and his staff resided and maintained their government offices at Sam Tong.

The Military Region Two resistance movement never focused on recruitment of individual fighting men. The decision to join and follow Vang Pao and Touby Lyfong involved a community agreement by village elders. If an entire village opted to support Vang Pao (sometimes by intimidation in the case of borderline villages), USG through USAID supported the people with supplies by cargo plane airdrops or helicopter. Over time there was so much tribal relocation and inability to grow rice that an entire generation of young Meo when asked where rice came from, would answer, "Why, from the sky, of course." There was also a firm commitment to support the village if forced by enemy action to evacuate its home area. Hence, knowledge that their loved ones would be cared for became a major factor in persuading tribesmen to join the irregular army.

Once a decision to join the resistance effort was collectively approved, in the earliest years, all able-bodied men were delivered first to the Padong site, then to Pha Khao, and eventually to Long Tieng for military training by American and Thai PARU advisors. Soldiers were not prepared to accept a permanent separation from their families, so final deployment normally involved their original village areas. Early in the resistance movement, Vang Pao and his advisors discovered that guerrilla fighters proved undependable in situations where their families were obligated to fend for themselves. In such cases, despite orders to the contrary, both soldiers and families fled



Cargo plane air dropping double bagged one-hundred-pound rice sacks over a friendly drop zone (DZ).

Mike Jarina Collection.

together, making any orderly withdrawal impossible, and creating scenes of mass panic.

After witnessing such chaos in the past, to avoid similar scenarios should villagers be pressed by the enemy, Vang Pao and USAID's policy elected to evacuate entire populations, and resettle them to safer southern areas. Because of time constraints and requirements for immediate action, movements were generally not planned or well organized, just implemented.¹

PHOU NONG EVACUATION

Redirected to Long Tieng to commence evacuation of refugees desiring to avoid harm's way, I loaded "General Direction," who still wore his silly looking helmet with a white star emblazoned on the front. His presence was supposed to enhance my terrain familiarization and avoid enemy AAA during my first run to Phou Nong (Site-71), a site located forty-seven nautical miles northeast at 4,600-feet. We cleared the Padong Ridge gap and flew easterly along the river valley toward Phou Sao. Second only to Phu Bia, it marked the tallest mountain in the area. Phou Sao was bracketed by major artery Route-4 and alternate Route-42. Both roads streamed out of the eastern Xieng Khouang Ville Valley to merge south of the mountain before again assuming a Route-4 identity. Then the road wound easterly through the Tha Thom Valley where it again turned south toward Paksane and the Mekong River. We cruised at sufficient altitude to avoid small arms fire. However, to prevent paralleling the road and unlikely, but potential, AAA gun positions, before reaching Route-4 we turned north toward Phou Kabo.

¹ Douglas Blaufarb, 41-42.
Anonymous Contributor who worked in the theater for many years.



A Long Tieng guide (General Direction) who rode in our H-34 cockpit. He was charged by Vang Pao to direct us safely to a site for the first time. We placed our trust in these people, and were not always amply rewarded.

Author Collection.

Placing one's life in the hands of a young guide who barely spoke English frayed my nerves and was difficult to tolerate at times. Therefore, during this trip, I constantly questioned "General Direction," so called as we rarely knew VP's relatives' names, "Where the bad guy?" Seemingly unconcerned with my harassment, he laconically pointed or broad brushed the area with a wide-ranging wave toward Xieng Khouang Ville. Aware that the area was indeed occupied by enemy, I decided that he displayed his best form and perhaps I could trust him. Still, recalling the unpleasant experience in June, I gave the mountain a wide berth.

Aware that 37mm AAA pits ² and other equally lethal gun positions, were centered near the Ville, and farther west in the rolling hills toward the mouth of the valley, we wasted little time crossing the valley. I found it difficult to resolve the fact that we allowed enemy anti-aircraft gunners to operate with impunity and hose an unsuspecting victim who might venture into their territory. However, without proper air resources we would have to live with the threats and know where we were at all times, or suffer dire consequences. ³

Breathing a sigh of relief, we safely completed the valley transit and entered a ten-mile stretch of high mountains. It was really a hazardous trade-off substituting a low area containing bad guys with AAA weapons for another that provided limited forced landing areas. However, that really defined helicopter flying in upper Laos. Danger of one kind or another was always

² Normally such an emplacement involved three spaced holes shaped like a fan with provisions to accommodate an optional fire control radar van in the center.

³ The few T-28s in the RLAF inventory were still restricted by the U.S. Ambassador to using only guns and rockets, and further restricted as to offensively striking hard targets.

present. It was just a matter of which one took precedence at any moment, and of coping with each physically and mentally.

The site was located about five miles from the Ban Ban Valley periphery. At all unfamiliar sites I used a technique before landing that served me well over the years. Circling overhead at altitude while waiting for the correct signal, I first observed ground activity. If children and animals were present, the likelihood of enemy presence was greatly diminished. Then, depending on these visual cues and a gut feeling that came with time and experience--call it a sixth sense--still cautious, I might descend in a tight spiral to the preferred side of the landing zone. Others autorotated, but I failed to appreciate a requirement for such a drastic maneuver, particularly since there was little opportunity to escape quickly. In addition, engine cylinder head temperature cooled rapidly during a power off descent, and a quick power recovery might possibly result in engine stoppage.

A multitude of sorry-looking people, anxious to leave Phou Nong, lined the strip. ⁴ Without anyone seemingly in charge, disorder reigned during the loading procedure. Women toting their babies papoose style, carrying bundles of their favorite possessions, and old men and the infirm converged on and mobbed Hotel-14. With past enemy atrocities fresh in their minds, like Pathet Lao killing a village chief and then shooting his wife in the breast, who could blame them for wanting to be on the first stage out of Dodge?

The refugees' ragged appearance perplexed me considerably, but was only part of a much larger problem bothering me. As a confirmed commie hater, the fact that the enemy shot at me at

⁴ I was previously informed that the people flowed in from North Vietnam, but they most likely arrived from in and around the Ban Ban area.

will, without the slightest retaliation or punishment, only whetted my appetite to fly one of the Udorn-based Thai T-28s in reprisal against them. Many of us believed that such action could be accomplished with minimum familiarization, for as former Marine aviators, most of us possessed considerable time in the plane--I had seventy-five hours, which included an abbreviated gunnery course.

From my viewpoint, when everyone was aware that counter fire from an airborne helicopter discouraged any temptation to shoot at us from the ground, Company regulations regarding crewmembers' restriction against carrying weapons was terribly wrong.⁵ Likewise, I believed that our current foreign policy prosecuting the Lao war was seriously flawed. Furthermore, why our expertise with machines to conduct offensive air actions and neutralize logistic routes and enemy positions was not utilized puzzled me. After all, this would not set a precedent, for it was not the weaker Pathet Lao forces that prevented a RLG victory, but foreign elements meddling in the country's affairs.

At the time, I was not aware that because of enemy activity in Laos and South Vietnam, plans were already in motion for a more concerted intelligence gathering effort. Included in these plans were low-level reconnaissance flights. However, indiscriminate T-28s strikes were not yet authorized. Beside the negative political aspect and escalatory nature of bombing, this was probably a good policy, for only three of the six T-28s in the Lao Air Force inventory were available at any time.

State did permit Ambassador Unger defensive use in intercepting illegal enemy supply flights, and in isolated cases to counter Pathet Lao attacks on government positions with airborne rockets and machine guns. Retaliation was thought

⁵ The no weapons policy originated from the State Department and was followed by Company management in Taipei.

necessary immediately following Pathet Lao provocation to dissuade further attacks. Despite this occasional exception to use the planes, Secretary Dean Rusk did not yet approve a requested air cratering and interdiction program along the upper reaches of Route-7. This would have to await a more suitable time. ⁶

I initially relied on old Punz to organize loading, and provide an accurate head count and weight estimate. After he failed miserably at this, I shut down in order to assess the situation and supervise. Observing people packed together and their goods piled to the transmission deck, I understood his plight. Therefore, I asked General Direction to help me control the loading. After performing a hover check, we departed. I still did not have a firm idea of either a body count or actual weight, but, with a little pilot technique, the helicopter responded perfectly and performed its job.

I dropped my passengers at Sam Tong, where AID personnel waited to distribute blankets, rice, cooking oil, and other necessities to the refugees. Then I climbed out of the bowl and headed south. Climbing over the ridgeline dividing the two sites, I dove into the western end of the Long Tieng bowl. While the guide proffered a list of items deemed necessary for the refugees' immediate survival, I conferred with Case Officer Vint Lawrence about sending someone influential to Site-71 to assist in coordinating loading activity. Appreciating that mobbing greatly slowed the operation and endangered the aircraft, Vint elected to fly to the site with a Helio Courier pilot who was also shuttling refugees. The rest of the day, with Vint's able

⁶ Lyndon Johnson Library, 09/04/97. Message Traffic from State to the Vientiane Embassy, 26/10/63.
Joe Leeker, Air America in Combat.

assistance, I completed several more shuttles before terminating operations.

The workload was enormous. Good weather prevailing during the period, and maximum flying from dawn to dusk, enabled participating aircraft to move hundreds, if not thousands of souls to Sam Tong. Attempting to carry as much as possible on each flight, I was only limited by my fuel load, aircraft performance at altitude, and the size of the cabin compartment. Rolling Hotel-14 off the short, rutted strip did not add a measure of safety to the operation, but greatly increased my ability to carry more total weight. A timely fuel drop at the site enabled me to burn fuel down to a low state, and helped expedite the evacuation.

With Phou Nong largely evacuated of threatened souls, additional people from the surrounding sites of San Tiau (Site-02) and Ban Pha Kha (VS-40) flooded eleven miles south into an assembly area, a three-mile-wide circular bowl at Ban Sa Noi.⁷

ALTERNATE REFUGEE SITES AND MOUNTAIN SIGNIFICANCE

By the fourth day, with Sam Tong largely saturated and the Customer unwilling or unable to accommodate more refugees, an interim friendly site was selected on the eastern slopes of Phou Sao, a high mountain only second to Phou Bia. Located about halfway up the mountain, although an area of past bitter conflict, one of the original Meo sites at Ban Pong (Site-95) afforded the refugees a temporary respite from harm's way, and the good folks at Sam Tong sufficient time to better plan and organize a more realistic resettlement area.

Phou Sao, like many of the soaring mountain masses in Laos, encompassed a ten mile long, seven-mile-wide area. The

⁷ Ban Xan Noy, later designated Site-119 in the Air America Lao Air Facilities Data book.

definitive peaks, excellent checkpoints, soared to 8,500-feet, dwarfing all others in Military Region Two except its nearby sister, Phu Bia. Even during normal times, many Meo gravitated toward these inspiring formations. Mountain masses were important to the Meo for a number of reasons. A subjective motive was religious. The majority of superstitious Meo were animists, and huge mountains represented powerful spirits that had to be appeased in order to use them. Within their subconscious mind, mountains embodied superior strength, so important to the Meo psyche, and much like our awe of mountains that tend to foster a feeling of insignificance and belief in a supreme being. Other reasons were objective and practical. Mountain springs provided clear, clean water; abundant land for employing the slash-and-burn technique for upland rice agriculture; a cool climate where mosquitoes could not breed; perfect conditions for opium poppy growing; and, most important, security, for anyone trying to encroach on a community could be easily observed climbing the slopes.

That night I had an opportunity to meet the latest addition to Sam Tong, Blaine Jensen. Brian O'Connor had preceded him. Both IVS workers were friendly, but Blaine, obviously well-educated and a highly intelligent person, held nothing back and always provided answers to my often-inane questions.

Mike Marshall arrived on the 17th in Hotel-15. After a flight to Houei Sa An, east of Bouam Long where road mining operations on Route Six were still in progress, he was assigned to work with me on the refugee evacuations. Flight Mechanics were switched, with Rick Decosta rotating to my ship.

After only one day of shuttles, like at Sam Tong, Ban Peung overflowed with people. Therefore, taking up the slack, Pop selected a new site at Ban Moug Cha (Victor Site-113), a long, verdant valley area located just southeast of Phu Bia. Because

of the area's lush grass and cattle raising potential, we referred to it as VP's farm. For obvious reasons, newer pilots later called it the "golf course." The distance between Ban Sa Noi and Ban Peung was only about twelve miles. Therefore, depending on loading factors and availability of fuel at the sites, shuttles to Moung Cha consumed more time, resulting in fewer people hauled. The flights, thirty-three-miles southwest, took me directly over Route-4, friendly Tha Vieng (VS-13), and another early Momentum site at Moung Oum (VS-22).

With over fifty hours under my belt, largely because of the evacuation and fine flying weather, I was enjoying an outstanding RON. The operation provided lots of flight time and an opportunity to save hundreds of lives. Even better, most air time consisted of a hundred percent hazardous pay. Optimistic, counting my chickens before they hatched, I firmly believed that increased flying would be the future norm. Why not? We had three more helicopters. Although really tired, I was becoming used to the routine and believed I could have continued flying many more hours. There was time to rest later. However, the interesting and rewarding RON did not last, for before we had an opportunity to launch on the 19th, my relief pilot arrived on a Caribou. I caught a ride south on B-851, flown by the program's tall, friendly Chief Pilot, Bob LaTurner.

After completing my transition to Udorn, later in the day, Scratch Kanach arrived to ferry ICC ship CIC-5 for maintenance inspection.

After resting a few days, I talked to Tom Moher, who mentioned that he was conducting a personal health kick. Evidently, feeling unwell for some time and concerned about his health, he had visited the Army signal unit doctor. Following an examination, the good doctor found nothing wrong with Tom, but highly recommended exercise. He added that an individual could look perfectly well externally, but possess "rotten" internal organs. He suggested running.

As I had not performed bona fide exercise except flying--the vibrations shook one's entire body and provided some stimulation--for some time, the doctor's advice sounded entirely logical. Therefore, intending to rectify my sedentary life, Caesar and I began jogging on the soft shoulder of Tahan Thanon toward town. Perhaps too vigorous, my attempts to return to good health lasted less than a week, at which time, my innards felt so bad I thought I would surely die. Another reason for terminating the foolishness was that once unleashed, Caesar was difficult to control around people and other animals. Displaying a sense of adventure, he might suddenly lope off into the rice paddies after a water buffalo.

Tom ceased running for other reasons. After a buying trip to Hong Kong, during which he purchased a jogging suit, he embarked on the new health venture. Tom and Kathy still lived across the street from the airport. In order to beat the heat, Tom arose early, donned his suit, and jogged along one side of the airstrip and then the other. Then he returned to the house panting and his body dripping wet from the morning heat and humidity. Before long, Tom noticed that Kathy was becoming a little testy with him upon his return. Nevertheless, he continued the routine, but Kathy still seemed increasingly cool

and unusually short with him. Finally, out of desperation, stating, *"Our relationship used to be good, but now she is angry at me all the time,"* Tom enlisted Jane Alston to help determine Kathy's problem.

It turned out the problem was actually no problem, just suspicion and jealousy, a common condition infusing many Asian women. When queried, Kathy told Jane in broken English, *"Yeah, he go Hong Kong and buy him new pajamas. Now every morning he go see his Thai girlfriend and come back sweating and tired."* That effectively terminated Tom's attempt to attain good health. ¹

PIG ROAST

On the last Saturday of the month, the Club sponsored another pig roast, this time to celebrate the new pool groundbreaking. As the Club sprang for the beer, some of us went out to the compound early to watch the industrious Filipinos at work, and to socialize with other crewmembers. This time Billy P cleverly erected a bucking bronco built from a metal engine "A" frame and a fifty-five-gallon drum. Suspended from the "A" frame, the device operated much like a giant swing, and some macho types, fueled by alcohol, tried it with varying success. Billy P, for one, ended up on the ground. One of the retaining rings broke while Jack Connor was in flight. The contraption did not appear too safe, so I just watched the revelry. We stood around a long time, salivating from the delightful aromas wafting from the pit, and all of us were pretty well lit up by the time the Filipino boys exhumed the meat for carving. The reward was well worth a long wait. With succulent pork, potato salad, and all the booze one could consume, even more employees

¹ Dan Alston Interview, 09/22/99.

and their families attended the party. As we had run out of meat early at the first party, an additional hog had been cooked, but the hoard of people quickly consumed the three large pigs. Not completely sated, about the time I looked for another plate of pork, predictably all the meat was gone. Inevitably, humans tend to spoil a good thing, especially when something is free. This was evidenced when some individuals observed cooks passing food out the back door to their buddies, and cases or handfuls of beer being hauled off to sell or consume off the premises. Despite the fun, a bitter critique later indicated that people never seen before, and certainly never supportive of the Club, had attended the free function. Consequently, that was the final all-hands party sponsored by the Club for some time.

BILLY P GOES MISSING

October 27, the day following the blowout party, became one of doom and gloom. While checking for mail late in the day and exchanging casual pleasantries with some peers and their wives on the concrete walk between the Club and Administration building, word quietly filtered down through the ranks that the colorful and popular Billy P was missing.

With the recent addition of the Coast Guard H-34G models, we received expanded work in the form of Thai Border Patrol missions. That day, Operations scheduled Billy to fly an American BPP advisor, Jim Jones, a good friend of the Marshall family, to isolated sites in northern Thailand. The remoteness of the region suggested more optimistic speculation that he either had encountered radio problems, or had not been able to transmit an operations normal report. The more pessimistic believed that he had crashed. If he survived, the possibility of a night in the weeds with injuries was not pleasant to contemplate. At any rate, because of the late hour and lack of

aircraft in that region, Air America could not mount a SAR. That would have to wait until morning.

As time passed and we mulled over the sketchy information regarding Hotel-16, the obvious fact arose that someone had to inform Billy's new wife, Wai Ying, that he was missing. Because of the sensitivity attached to such a task, no one really wanted the responsibility. *How do you tell a woman that her man is missing? Is it done collectively, individually, or what?* Then, when we were still deciding how to tactfully address the situation, and screwing up our courage to do something, even if it was wrong, Wai Ying appeared in the courtyard. Aware that Billy was due back that night, she decided to meet him for supper. Everyone's courage immediately dissipated, and embarrassed, tongue-tied people began slipping away in the half-light. When confronted, Jim Coble finally lied, telling Wai Ying that her husband was committed to a last-minute RON. However, he coaxed his wife Bonnie to spend the night at the Pearson house playing Maha Jung.

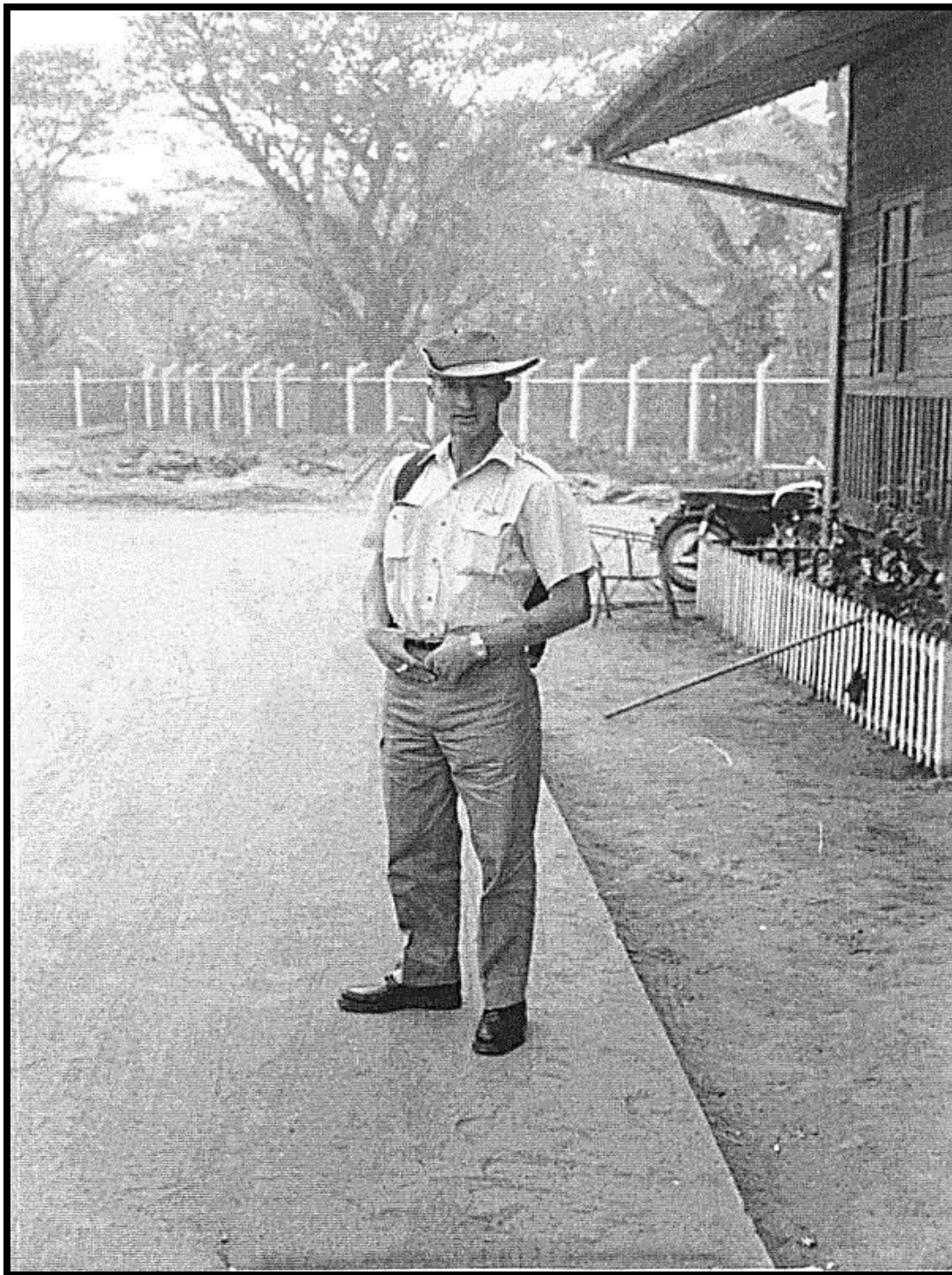
Fortunately, the event ended happily. The former Army paratrooper and Ranger Pearson, Jones, and the Flight Mechanic were discovered the following day twenty-two miles northeast of Muang Loie. Initial reports indicated that Billy had crashed Hotel-16 while attempting to depart an elevated, wooded, confined area. Recognizing the potential for fire, Billy ushered all his charges away from the helicopter. No one onboard was injured, but as the survivors watched from the edge of the landing zone, the aircraft burned to ashes. The incident marked the unit's first helicopter loss in two years. Apparently, as frequently occurred during a severe H-34 crash, the positive and negative electrode cables normally attached to the battery located in the clutch compartment had shorted, producing sparks. The ignition source, combined with highly volatile fuel spilling

from ruptured tanks, then caused a fire and explosion. Once ignited, the magnesium fuselage plates, employed to reduce overall weight, burned with such intensity that almost the entire helicopter was soon consumed, destroying all evidence of a probable cause.

After the dust settled, some doubt regarding the veracity of Billy P's account arose and clouded the issue when he freely informed people that during takeoff, he experienced a power loss and a settling movement. Recognizing further flight impossible, he immediately performed a backward autorotation into the clearing, resulting in a tail first ground contact that began a destructive chain of events leading to total destruction. As to the claim of a backward auto, one could imagine the reaction from our skeptics. In all the many years of helicopter operation represented by our pilot complement, no one had remotely heard of or practiced a backward autorotation. Billy's credibility suffered greatly, and as the ship was configured with highly sensitive boosted throttles, many believed that Billy had simply failed to monitor his gauges and lost RPM. Even Jones, a rated fixed wing pilot who was in the left seat, conceded to Mike Marshall that the accident likely resulted from pilot error.

Fortunately, the Flight Department's policy still did not condemn pilots for valid operational losses. The official version of the accident went in the books as resulting from an engine malfunction. In this case, relieved that all involved had survived unscathed, except for some humorous banter about Billy's "backward auto," the matter was quickly forgotten. That is, except for the fact that we had lost one of our few sources of flight time and revenue. ²

² Mike Marshall Phone Calls, 09/23-24/91.
Marshall Letter.
EW Knight Email, 06/16/00; Jim Coble Email. Thai Air Accidents.



Bill Pearson (Billy P) wearing the distinctive Air America gray uniform and bush hat in front of the Operations-Administration building.

Nick Burke collection April 1963.

Above average flight time continued. On 29 October the Operations Department scheduled me for a Sam Tong RON to equalize my time with others. I was informed that I would relieve Mike Marshall and fly Hotel-15. I was originally scheduled to deadhead upcountry on Hotel-14 when it exited the hangar and was released after being considered airworthy. I could attest to the fact that this particular machine had flown a lot during the month and had undergone at least one, perhaps two, one hundred-hour inspections. With demand in the field peaking, after only one hectic night in the hangar, everyone expected maintenance miracles resulting in immediate turnarounds and a release to flight operations.

Hotel-14 failed to make it to the flight line. Despite high expectations, increased flying had taken its toll on several working parts, especially main and tail rotor blades. These particular items were at a premium, for Navy logistical pipelines directed a majority of these components to the U.S. Marine H-34 squadron based in South Vietnam, where problems with sand and debris erosion drastically shortened blade life. Therefore, on a rare occasion when a pilot entered a gripe in the logbook involving a suspected rotor blade vibration, lacking replacement blades, maintenance generally had no other option than to measure profiles and weigh blades to achieve matching sets. It was a difficult time-consuming period for the maintenance group, as searching, weighing, folding, lifting, bolting, and manual flag tracking were all involved in the process. Therefore, changing blades could be tedious, and often produced unsatisfactory results.

Accelerating normal component wear, and exacerbating the vibration problem, many pilots flew too high and too fast

upcountry, while heavily loaded. Either highly motivated to achieve maximum utilization and performance for the Customer, or naïve as to H-34's mountain operational requirements, they knowingly or unknowingly abused the machines.

Modifying flight school techniques, or introducing new concepts, was extremely difficult for some pilots to accept. According to Chief Pilot Jim Coble, many stubborn pilots would not acknowledge advice about coddling the helicopter. For instance, he attempted to stress that, assuming a smooth surface, one could perform a fifty-foot rolling takeoff without increasing power over thirty-inches of manifold pressure. Yet many pilots insisted on lifting to a hover at maximum power, rotating, settling off a ground cushion, and praying to achieve translational lift without contacting the ground.

Because of the myriad of component parts involved in H-34 systems, abnormal vibrations were often difficult to isolate from normal ones inherent in the helicopter. On a degree of difficulty scale, a pilot was subjectively challenged to differentiate between low, medium, and high frequency vibrations. ¹

VIBRATIONS

H-34 helicopter vibrations were unique to the profession. Caused by many factors, they were often difficult to assess. The most common problem with our four-bladed lift system at the time was experienced as an excessive low frequency vibration--one vibration per 360-degree revolution of the rotor blades. The culprit usually involved a worn, damaged, or mismatched blade,

¹ Author Note: Never having achieved military test pilot qualifications or experience, most individuals had no troubleshooting capability, and, if aware of a problem, chose to simply ignore increased vibration levels in favor of more flight time.

or a combination thereof. This type of vibration could originate from shipping or handling damage, excessive erosion of paint and abrasion of the leading edge, shrinkage of rubber pocket separators, misalignment of trailing edge pockets, dynamic unbalance, blade twist, or excessive battle damage. Because of condensation formed in the mountains during extreme temperature changes, water in a blade could create a noticeable imbalance. Feeling this condition during the first start in the morning was common in the cold season, but was swiftly eradicated when the whirling blades expelled the moisture.

In troubleshooting excessive main rotor blade vibrations, the condition of the rotor head bearing, dampers, and other related components had to be statically assessed by competent, experienced mechanics. Any single defect could cause what we called a one per. To help, measures were listed in the maintenance manual to be used as a visual, audio, and feel check in the trouble shooting process. Some items on the rotor head to be checked for signs of wear--in the trade called play--were: noises coming from the damper, eye bolt, bearing play, pitch change link upper end play, pitch change link "Y" grunion play, blade cuff to horn play, damper grunion play, shock absorber assembly to damper shaft play, and damper to damper mount bushings.

Mixed unmatched blades could cause a problem. Installation of one low time and three high time blades was often the cause of vibrations. As mentioned, blade shortages created by priority in the South Vietnamese Theater contributed to this problem. As a result, trial and error blade swapping became a necessary evil leading to lengthy test flight sessions that mainly involved manual tracking, a tried and true, but archaic blade tracking procedure. The flag, a taped bungee cord device fastened to a tall metal pole, required experienced ground personnel to

carefully advance the device into the rotating blade tip path. Then, interpreting the pre-marked colored blade tip strike, they adjusted rotor head pitch change links up or down to create a thumb's width mark overlap. Depending on the experience level of the tracker and blade condition, the process could be easy or difficult.

A vibration feedback felt by a pilot through the cyclic could indicate an out-of-track condition, a damaged or unbalanced blade, a damper problem--from air, binding, or leakage of the reservoir fluid--a sleeve or horn, or a faulty servo system.

Before flight, a pilot could spot a ragged blade track from the cockpit by observing the rotating blades' tip path plane. By cycling control levers, he exercised and purged the servo pilot valves. If they suspected a blade problem, the pilot and ground crew could track the blades with the primary servo system shut off, in which case, the blades sought a natural aerodynamic plane. If one observed a good track with the primary on, but not with the servo off, a blade problem could be suspected.

If left unresolved, medium and high frequency vibrations could lead to serious problems and eventual material failure. Tail rotor, transmission, clutch assembly, inverters, and blower components could be involved. Some of the many causes could relate to worn bearings, or an out-of-track condition. During an autorotation, a competent test pilot could identify and localize a high or medium frequency. Much could be determined in the cockpit by estimating the RPM range of a high frequency. Vibrations felt through rudder pedals, throttle, decking, drive shaft, instrument panel, and control cables assisted in analyzing the problem. Assisting a pilot, the Flight Mechanic could feel various portions of the fuselage for high vibration, levels either in flight or on the ground. A vibration noticed in

the fuselage that radiated down through the main rotor shaft was evidenced by increased vibrations the faster the aircraft flew.

After all work to improve vibration levels was completed, final analysis rested with the test pilot's competence, and ultimately by the PIC who was tasked to fly the helicopter. Naturally, much analysis was subjective, for every individual possessed his own level of sensitivity and tolerance relating to vibrations. ²

Because ships returning from upcountry rarely arrived in Udorn before dark, many inspections were performed at night in the hangar using weak and ineffective flashlights that failed to reveal battle damage, cracks in vital areas, and other critical items. For this reason, a thorough preflight on the flight line in daylight was essential before taking a machine upcountry, especially following a hundred-hour check. This required more than a cursory walk-around. To know what previous squawks were recorded, a scheduled pilot had to review past entries in the logbook, and then conduct a thorough preflight. This could take the flight mechanic and pilot up to half an hour. Many pilots relied solely on the Flight Mechanic's preflight, and on that basis, simply cranked the machine up and departed. Flight Mechanics--and not only the most experienced--were generally very conscientious, and sometimes this procedure worked; at other times it did not. However, ultimate responsibility for assuring airworthiness lay with the pilot-in-command.

² John Aspinwall Memorandum Concerning Helicopter Vibrations.
Jim Coble Email, 04/18/02.
EW Knight Email, 06/18/00.

Jim Coble had recently returned from four weeks sick leave in the States. Since his employment with Air America, he had lost forty-pounds. Not feeling well, and suspecting that he had a serious liver condition, he went to the University of California Hospital in San Francisco for outpatient testing. Doctors easily diagnosed his symptoms as a massive parasite infestation and prescribed the proper medicine to eradicate the organisms. While he was medicating and recovering, Bonnie obtained her American citizenship.¹

During Jim's absence, Abadie returned temporarily from Taipei to assist Viri Black in managing the operation. Wayne Knight, a friend of Abadie, had occasionally assisted with management flight duties since mid-1962. Lately, at the behest of Viri, he had been transitioning into more permanent training and test duties. In addition to filling a gap in Coble's absence, he would supplement and then replace Jerry McEntee, who planned home leave, and after that was being "loaned" to the U.S. Embassy in Nepal. People generally referred to the unpaid, unheralded, untitled duty as "helping out in the office." For some time, Wayne and Jerry's efforts allowed Jim Coble to better manage and perform administrative work. Because of home leave, STO, sickness, and upcountry requirements, there were usually three or four management-aspiring individuals and other "wanabees" willing to volunteer for this work at various times. In addition to conducting time-consuming test flights, and engine and transmission run-ins, the individuals also flew six-month proficiency and upcountry area check rides with their

¹ Jim Coble Emails, 03/14/02, 04/18/02.

peers.² When Wayne Knight informed me of a substantial delay in the slow progress placing Hotel-14 back in service, I found alternate transportation on B-851. The first leg of my trip ended at Wattay Airport, Vientiane. Ed Eckholdt, the blond Chief Pilot of the program, piloted the high tailed Caribou. Approaching Teutonic proportions, big Ed was reputed to be one of the key men in the fixed wing program. One could not help but be in awe of the highly respected, handsome, and impressive man. Ed and other PICs always agreed to my request to sit in the jump seat and observe their cockpit procedures, including takeoffs and landings.

Arriving too late to catch an immediate flight to Sam Tong, I repaired to the Air America restaurant. While waiting for transportation, I enjoyed the specialty of the house, called, a "Football." The popular item, produced by the Chinese/Vietnamese couple running the business, consisted of a steamed dough ball filled with sweet chopped meat--usually pork. Thus far, I had rarely had an opportunity to rub elbows with my larger-than-life fixed wing brothers. Many retired military airplane drivers, representing an older generation, had worked a few years for the Company. At times I got the impression that a few harbored an arrogant, superior attitude toward us lesser helicopter pilots. It rather amused me, for as former Marine helicopter pilots, we first cut our teeth on fixed wing planes, and we all possessed instrument tickets. Should someone really irritate us while extolling their experience and prowess, a simple question would usually silence them. "*Hey fellow, I can fly planes, can you fly helicopters?*" Despite their postures, we envied them, for during

² No formal ground or flight-training syllabus had been developed yet. Hired helicopter employees were supposed to know how to fly the H-34, and were assigned to fly with more experienced pilots during the OJT-area familiarization period.

the flight time drought, they continued to fly daily supply sorties, generating impressive income.

Checking with operations clerks every hour, I did not have any luck proceeding to my destination. Finally, after many test flights to restore Hotel-14 to an airworthiness condition, Wayne and Stan Wilson arrived in the bird. Usually, I rode in the left seat, but now, denied second pilot time, I logged an hour deadhead time. It was late when we rolled onto the damp Site-20 strip.

After Mike Marshall secured for the night, he informed me that the day's marginal weather had limited flight time to half of what he had expected, and Udorn operations wanted him to fly the following day. Therefore, I had to await my turn in the cockpit.

With a down day ahead of me, I made the most of it, sitting out of the rain and talking to whoever might desire conversation. One person who provided me substantial face time was Blaine Jensen. We discussed many things, one being the enemy's price on our heads that was frequently broadcast over both Hanoi and Pathet Lao radio. Initially, a million-kip reward mentioned the capture of Pop Buell or Vang Pao by name. Then the reward extended to any American, including pilots, working in Military Region Two. It stipulated that a captured individual had to be delivered alive. With average kip selling at 450 to the dollar, the sum did not seem especially large to us, but it was an enormous sum for a Lao or Vietnamese.

THE HOSPITAL

During the day, between spates of rain showers, Blaine offered to show me the Sam Tong hospital. I had never been inside the facility, but, dust permitting, had merely taxied close to the entrance to wait while orderlies arrived with crude

stretchers to carry the sick and wounded inside the two-winged building.

Since few natural products were available in the valley, woven bamboo mats slated for walls had been flown in by helicopters from other sites during initial construction. The galvanized metal-roofed buildings contained thirty raised plank beds to keep patients off the dirt floors and away from the insects and vermin. Thin blankets provided some protection from cold nights. Over half a wing served as an operating room and living quarters for two Filipino Operation Brotherhood (OB) doctors contracted by USAID and cleared by Doctor Weldon. A few U.S. Army cots inherited from Special Forces White Star days were the most modern equipment in the building. After seeing the rudimentary hospital, I considered that the slightest improvement in the operation would constitute a major step forward.

In addition to OB doctors, later to be supplemented over the years by rotating U.S. military, Lao, and USAID doctors and nurses, Weldon hired Chanh, a young man holding a certificate attesting to his superior medical training, and who was already working for Vang Pao to initiate a medic program at Pha Khao. I frequently carried Chanh to various locations and found him to be a very personable individual, one who knew a lot about the area and enjoyed talking to pilots. After Chanh arrived, Doctor "Jiggs" had a kerosene refrigerator delivered to Site-20 to cool perishable drugs. He also sent a generous supply of drugs to use in the hospital. For security, a separate place within the warehouse was built and allocated to store the lifesaving drugs.³

³ Blaine Jensen Letters, #1, 03/02/96, 05/06/97, 08/04/98.

Mike flew sufficient hours during the day to fulfill his monthly allotment, so that Udorn allowed me to assume command of his ship the following day. Starting early, I flew a full day positioning refugees, provisions, and bags of seed rice to outlying sites. John Timmons and I returned to Udorn that evening for a maintenance inspection.

Despite the untimely loss of Hotel-16, flight time for the month had been excellent, reaching a fleet total of 937 hours, which ultimately proved to be the highest for the year. ⁴

On a personal level, I calculated the 600 extra dollars added to my base pay, plus provisional allowance, would top 1,700 dollars. That was not quite the "big money" earned by pilots during the glorious heydays of 1960-1961, but the paycheck was moving in that direction.

INTEL

A special report prepared within CIA offices analyzing approaching dry season military prospects of the various factions in Laos, noted that both sides were strengthening their positions in strategic areas.

"The recent buildup facilitates enemy capability to advance in strength against the FAR and Neutralist forces throughout the country. Pathet Lao stiffened by NVA within their units or separately, previously demonstrated capabilities to advance successfully against government resistance."

However, offering a disclaimer, the report echoed a belief within the intelligence world that the communists:

"Would not attack with such vigor as to cause Western intervention. Instead, they would expand controlled territory

⁴ Udorn Maintenance Department Report.

and attempt to establish control over areas they claimed were within the Geneva agreements. Further speculation indicated they might attempt to expand assets on the PDJ and establish a logistics link with commie forces around the Sala Phu Khoun road junction north of Vang Vieng.

Logistically, in both MR 2 and 3, along important roads already open, supplies were moving along Routes-7, 12, 8, and other routes leading to the Tchepone area. Supplies were noted moving out of China to northern border areas toward Khammouane Province in central Laos.

One upbeat result of the spring fighting was the shift of a majority of Kong Le Neutralists to the government side. Since then, replacing Soviet-fighting tools, the Neuts had been re-equipped with U.S. type weapons. Additionally, a senior Lao officer reconstituted the administrative part of the Neutralist Army."

Cobbled together from dated intelligence gathered before the 1 November report date, and without including details, the situation report speculated on events already occurring in Military Region Two, that the enemy would probably expend the majority of effort in clearing operations against tribal Meo, Yao, and Kha resistance fighters challenging Pathet Lao control over large areas in northern and eastern Laos. ⁵

⁵ Lao Crises, The Situation in Laos, 490, 1 November 1963.

November produced a rash of major surprises for us lay geopolitical analysts. The coup d'état and murder of Prime Minister Diem in South Vietnam puzzled us, as did the continuing assassinations of military and political leaders in Laos. However, the event in South Vietnam appeared especially self-defeating, for how could the beleaguered country ever prevail in a conflict while deep in the throes of major power struggles and instability? Taking advantage of the situation, the Viet Cong apparatus effected political and military advances across the country with many strategic hamlets overrun. Then, with rumors of a Cambodian coup, discounted by current newspapers, it appeared as if the Southeast Asian world was turning upside down.

Closer to home, the Bangkok papers reported that Prime Minister Sarit's liver disease was improving, although Captain Jerry Souders, working on the Bangkok JUSMAG contract, had information that contradicted this. After flying Sarit's son to a southern resort area, he learned that the Prime Minister was actually very ill and not expected to live much longer. This revelation was worrisome. His demise would cause a serious void in the kingdom's power structure. Who would step into his shoes, and what would the successor's political and military posture be toward the Lao situation, communism, and the West?

The worst blow to the entire Western world would occur before the month was out.

UPCOUNTRY

Before the end of the first week, Operations scheduled me to fly Hotel-14 for the Royal Lao Army out of Wattay Airport. During the day, I flew officers to Ban Hin Heup (later numbered

Site-365) and other government sites along Route-13. I recalled some pilot chatter about supporting the 1961 ceasefire talks logistically. These were first held at Hin Heup and then farther north at Ban Namone, where East and West faction helicopters shuttled dignitaries from both sides to peace parleys. Varying stories were embellished about Pathet Lao guards keeping Air America crewmembers in line with machine guns.

After an overnight stay in the administrative capital, Air Operations directed me to Long Tieng to support Vang Pao in his effort to stem enemy clearing actions in the mountains east of the Plain of Jars, and to initiate his own brand of offensive action. The four days in the hills hauling bullets, beans, and bandages marked a drastic departure from the refugee relief work of previous months.

POLICY DECISIONS

Despite evacuations and friendly troop movements during the middle of the previous month, on the second, regular enemy combat troops seized their first objective at Tha Lin Noi. Later attempts to retake the site ended in failure. Actually, preferring to only disrupt a forward base after chasing Meo soldiers and their dependents out, the enemy rarely expended the manpower or supply lines necessary to consolidate and fortify a mountain site. After the enemy abandoned a site, if deemed necessary for the war effort, Vang Pao's men generally reoccupied the position with a minimum of effort. In this case, disheartening for the Meo cause, on a second attempt to recapture the position, a disgruntled trooper killed Ly Sao, the fearless and respected Meo leader.

Possibly adding to the confusion and inability to retake Tha Lin Noi at this time was State's incessant waffling, especially dispensing advice and hard guidelines to Ambassador

Unger as to utilization of T-28 airpower. During this period, Washington policy makers attempted to decide the extent to which they were prepared to accelerate U.S. military resources in the Lao effort. The sizeable debate affected operations in several Lao military regions. An eventual outcome of the debate became the official policy Americans operated under for the remainder of the war: that military and civilian assistance was justified in Laos because the effort engaged enemy troops that otherwise would be used in the South Vietnam theater.

Discussion began with State's opinions and counsel on T-28 strikes in conducting reprisal attacks. Embassy officials did not want to restrict these to only retaliatory actions, but also in defense of FAR and Neutralist positions under Pathet Lao attacks and other aggression.

Officials noted that enemy tactics were generally predictable. Troops moved artillery into an attack position during the late evening to take advantage of cover and concealment. Ground attacks invariably occurred during the early morning hours. Therefore, it was advised that to gain maximum advantage, AIRA and the RLAF should develop air tactics adapted to benefit from this knowledge. Planes and crews should position to desirable locations for optimum use and a rapid response.

State authorized Unger to release one-hundred-pound bomb fuses in defense or reprisal in response to Pathet Lao attacks.¹ The message specified targets to include enemy artillery, troop concentration, convoys, supply dumps, and other lucrative facilities.

A week later, State turned down Unger's request to conduct the first offensive bombing strike during an attempt to retake

¹ Larger more effective 500-pound iron bombs were not authorized yet.

Site-18. The primary reason stemmed from the fact that from a public propaganda and psychological standpoint, such action was not deemed politically feasible. In addition, the twelve-day time lag since the site fell was considered too excessive to meet the stated criteria of a quick and timely response to enemy aggression. It seemed a dubious way to fight a war. ²

Despite the expected beginning of the dry season, weather patterns had not changed appreciably in Military Region Two. Smoke, haze, and rain clouds all coalesced to create poor navigation and flying conditions. We speculated that part of the problem lay in the relocation south of many people, and their proclivity to establish hillside communities and implement slash and burn agriculture. Nevertheless, because my experience level had approached greater proportions, I was able to navigate fairly well and fly maximum hours.

During the next few days, complemented by Mike Marshall flying Hotel-12, I shuttled troops, families, and ammunition back into the Ban Pha Kha (VS-40) dirt strip. The 4,300-foot site would provide a strategic locus to continue a sizeable presence in the area for interdiction and intelligence gathering. The movement also comprised a diversionary counter pressure against enemy forces that Vang Pao was so fond of implementing, and used to good advantage in the future. In contrast to refugee work, the increased war-related tasks instilled in me a sense of meaningful participation and contentment, for it now appeared that we were actually performing something tangible in the war effort. I felt this so deeply that I wrote home:

² Anonymous.

LBJ Library, State-Unger Messages, 08, 14/11/63.
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 104, FN-46.

"The war is going great guns now. Do not be misled that I am only carrying rice on my missions. Wars are not won with rice."

BAN SONG

On Friday, I worked most of the day shuttling troops and supplies to Site-40. Later Vint directed me to Ban Song (VS-29), a long trip north of the Plain of Jars and well east of Bouam Long (VS-88). Site-29 was yet another Meo position located close to a logistic artery leading from Sam Neua to Ban Ban. I had never been to the strip, or that far north, so a guide and a couple of fuel drums were loaded along with other items. Greatly facilitating trips north, FAR units had moved earlier from the southeast Plain of Jars to control areas around MOUNG KHEUNG, a site tucked close to the Plain's northwestern foothills. Because of a reduced risk of AAA fire and "safe" terrain underneath, we were able to fly from Ban Na directly across the western Plain. This entailed overflying Kong Le's positions at MOUNG PHANH direct to MOUNG KHEUNG and PHOU VIENG (VS-06), instead of miles out of the way to the west around PHOU SO (VS-57). Even at altitude, it was uncomfortable flying over portions of Routes-7 and 71.

At Site-6, I turned east and crossed Houei Sa An, where Dick Crafts and Tony Poe had encountered an unforgiving mine explosion the previous month. Dick was back in business, but Tony still recuperated in Bangkok. Ten minutes later, I soared over a disused portion of Route-61 without observing any trace of a trail or road. Consistent with many short mountain Helio Courier strips, the one at Ban Song ran west toward a steep hill. Although not a problem for a helicopter, the configuration restricted STOL pilots to only one way in and one way out approaches and departures, regardless of wind direction.

BATTLE DAMAGE

The squat, pig-nosed leader at the site wanted me to work locally delivering ammunition to a northern outpost.³ Since I had not learned how to best communicate with the people yet, it was difficult to comprehend exactly where he wanted me to go. Waving his hands in a general direction did not help the situation, so a young man scrambled into the left seat. I doubt if he had ever been in a helicopter before, because after launching northwest and coaxing him to point out our destination, he appeared confused. Circling the immediate area low level did not help his navigational skills. Then I discovered that we were definitely not where we were supposed to be. The characteristic ping, marking a projectile hitting the ship, resounded like a tuning fork throughout the fuselage. It reminded me of the time an eager beaver shot at Tom Moher and me on the way to Sayaboury Town. I returned to Ban Song where a hole in the aft fuselage confirmed the result of not knowing my exact location. While Lacsina hand pumped a drum of fuel into Hotel-14 for our return trip, the commanding officer wanted me to conduct another trip. Of course, after the latest fiasco, I politely refused.

NERVOUS MOMENTS

The original guide remained at Ban Song. This was not a problem, for I had memorized prominent checkpoints and carried a ragged map. After climbing to altitude to transmit an operations normal report for relay to a southbound aircraft, I retraced a flight path past Bouam Long and turned south at Phou Vieng toward the western Plain fringe and purported friendly positions. Because of the time of day, I established a course

³ Many of these village or area leaders had similar facial and physical characteristics.

directly toward Ban Na. Before long, glare from the sinking sun restricted all forward visibility. Despite the fact that I could see straight down and laterally, everything looked the same. Nervous because of area unfamiliarity and the battle damage just incurred, this new variable presented me with a situation I did not relish. My worthless map was too large to handle easily in the cockpit, and the knowledge that any eastern wind drift might force me over deadly AAA positions, only increased my mounting anxiety. The absence of radio traffic, and the war stories of Soviet cargo planes shooting at our unarmed planes did not instill great confidence in me.

I was almost positive that I was tracking directly for Ban Na, but following a few minutes of mounting uncertainty, and thinking about worse case scenarios, I became more alarmed. ⁴ Wanting the Flight Mechanic in the cockpit for company, another set of eyes, and to hold my map, I radioed to Lacsina on the scratchy ICS. At first, he failed to answer. I half expected this, for at the end of a day, with no tasks to perform until we landed, many Flight Mechanics dozed on the way to base. I called again and finally received the standard reply, "What's that, Cap?" This dialogue continued, until thoroughly irritated, I swore and screamed for him to get his blankety-blank butt into the cockpit. My efforts got instant results. In short order I observed the left seat pan folding upward and the head of a very confused and concerned Filipino appearing in the entry hole. Then, with my partner securely in the left seat holding the map, and the sun disappearing below the horizon, I calmed down and we entered the mountains on the southern fringe of the Plain of Jars. Much to my relief, the original heading chosen had been true, and we passed directly over Ban Na on the way to Sam Tong.

⁴ Author Note: That was one problem during extended cruise flight, too much time to think about the what ifs possible.

I felt a little foolish about the incident, particularly the unpleasantness with the Flight Mechanic, and sheepishly wondered what he thought about his new Captain. Unfortunately, I had allowed a set of adverse conditions alarm and unsettle me, but I learned a good lesson that afternoon. Mainly, that working at remote sites and performing unfamiliar duties fostered excessive apprehension. I hoped that with increased area familiarity my confidence would soar and overall performance increase.

After supper, while savoring the comfort of my recently-arrived sleeping bag, I mulled over the day's events and my actions, and drifted off to sleep. The bag, plus the added feature of my red wool ski mask, greatly helped ward off the nocturnal frigid air and allowed relatively undisturbed slumber. However, age and temperature extremes of attic storage had taken a toll on the bag. In the morning, I discovered that a few tiny feathers leaked through small holes in the rotten ticking and floated around the room. Charlie Weitz, who returned early from what he considered a dull home leave, protested the most. If I wanted to live a little longer, its repair would have to be a priority before my next RON and a major snowstorm enveloped the warehouse.

OPERATIONS IN XIENG KHOUANG VILLE

Located east of the Plain of Jars, strategic Xieng Khouang Ville lay in the center of a preferred invasion route (Route-4) from North Vietnam that led to lowlands and the Mekong River basin. Because of enemy activity, most arteries in the region had been closed to friendly forces since the early 1950s. Before the loss to Pathet Lao insurgents, the town had served as a colonial administrative center for the French and the seat of the provincial governor. The town also served as a daily market,

and hosted large December fairs attended by people from miles around.

Following the first enemy invasion, Chao Saykham Southakakoumal, the hereditary governor of Xieng Khouang Ville, moved to Vientiane, where he maintained a provincial government in exile. Later he rotated to Sam Tong when that site expanded to become an important refugee center and regional administrative headquarters for the Military Region Two Royal Lao army.

Another principal, Touby Lyfong, known to us as the "King of the Meo" because of his influence with the clans and the RLG, had lived next to the governor in the Ville and controlled a Meo militia in the early 1950s. After Kong Le's coup, the politically inclined Touby became the only Meo to obtain ministerial status in Souvanna Phouma's government. On a visit with the governor to visit family, the two friends called a meeting of Meo and district chiefs to discuss a potential communist takeover of the RLG. Recognizing the possibility to reassert a claim to Xieng Khouang autonomy, the governor declared that he would terminate all ties with the central government. After this, an alliance was made with General Phoumi Nosavan, who then supplied American-delivered arms and supplies to loyal FAR units, including Vang Pao's forces. After the Rightists recaptured Vientiane in December 1960, Xieng Khouang Ville leaders re-pledged their loyalty to the new government. When communist and Klong Le's forces rolled over the area at the end of December, Xieng Khouang Ville returned to and remained under enemy control. ⁵

⁵ Linwood Barney, *Southeast Asia Tribes, Minorities, and Nations*, 272, 273.

Arthur Dommen Interview with AID worker Ernest Kuhn, 03/25/95, 5-6, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 2006.

With the transfer of people and supplies to Ban Pha Kha largely completed, Vang Pao's emphasis switched to a gradual encirclement of Xieng Khouang Ville high ground with troops and mortar positions. He planned to supplement his offensive from the west with squeeze tactics utilizing Neutralist troops in the Phak Leung area east of Phu Kabo.

Supplying Meo troops located on the northern Phou Khe slopes facing the valley was exciting, frustrating, and highly dangerous. The lack of a briefing or good intelligence regarding the area situation was one problem. Another was uncharacteristic area smoke and haze that reduced horizontal visibility to nearly zero. This required slow flight to identify and avoid last minute collisions with other helicopters, and constant monitoring of the instruments and controls. Slant visibility was a little better, but not much. Therefore, while looking down at the ground to navigate, those of us involved in the operation had to rely on guides, checkpoints, pireps (pilot reports), and sheer luck to avoid trouble and perform the missions. Normally, to avoid any problem from the valley floor, flying low level over the foothills, we hugged the right side of the long valley with our landing lights on until reaching our destinations. On one run, I strayed into the valley and observed empty horseshoe shaped 37mm gun pits gouged out of the tops of rolling terrain. Because of the horrible flying conditions, unable to maintain visual contact while flying in the Xieng Khouang Valley, I was forced to return a load of mortar shells to Long Tieng. ⁶

In Tony's absence, Princeton-educated Vint Lawrence, who monitored the loading operation along with Vang Pao, seemed to take my return in stride. Still, it was the first, and almost

⁶ Consistent with the season, I logged twenty minutes actual instrument flight.

the last time in almost twelve years of flying in the Theater, that I aborted such a flight and it really embarrassed me.

Tony was missed, for as a respected field operative who showed interest in our welfare and in the successful outcome of our missions, he kept us informed with as much data as he knew about a situation. Vint was a good guy, but a younger person, one who effected a beard to counter his youth and command respect. His real job was to serve as Vang Pao's personal Case Officer and advisor, so perhaps he felt a bit aggravated at monitoring air operations. In contrast to the aggressive and profane Poe, the tall man was considerably more reserved, and definitely not the same ilk as his partner. Unless asked a direct question, he rarely offered small talk, the aviator's nectar of the gods. Other than ensuring that the ship was properly loaded, he rarely possessed information relating to enemy situations or the elevation of landing pads, and he did not seem interested in obtaining any.

Following the abort, my spirits rose when Vint assigned me to haul wounded from various rear echelon sites to the Sam Tong Hospital. During a couple of trips, I carried fifteen men with various types of wounds. That seemed like an inordinate number of casualties for a seemingly minor operation, and tended to display the extent of serious fighting occurring in and around the valley floor.

While casualties were offloaded on stretchers by orderlies, or they gimped to the hospital under their own power, I marveled that none of them had uttered a peep during the loading stage, the trip back, or while being removed from the helicopter. *What kind of stoic people were these, especially those with grievous wounds?* An American would have been screaming his head off.

There was a downside to carrying wounded and dead, for no stretchers or body bags were available in the field to aid



A cluster of empty 37mm gun pits on a hill overlooking Route-4 in the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley.

Author Collection.



Vang Pao directing 1963 operations in the Long Tieng loading area. Little girl with an umbrella is probably his daughter. Man dressed in black to Vang Pao's right is "Plug," a close relative and trusted bodyguard. A small village is visible at the foot of the mountains. Bill Cook is PIC of the H-34.

Marshall Collection.

delivery, or to contain body fluids. At day's end, little water was available in the Sam Tong Valley to sluice blood from plywood decking covering the cabin floor. Originally designed to minimize damage from heavy fuel drums and other equipment, during manufacture, holes were cut in the plywood to accommodate tie down rings. These openings subsequently permitted liquid or excrement from animals or humans to seep onto the metal floor and cracks. During a long RON and warm weather, congealed mixtures could exude unbelievably disagreeable odors. It was an unpleasant adjunct to our work, but one with which we all had to cope. This was equally so for the Udorn maintenance crews assigned to clean the helicopter.

PHAK LEUNG

Early on the final day of my RON, I teamed with Captain Bill Zeitler to ferry Meo officers to Ban Phak Leung, a lowland village located about eight miles east of Xieng Khouang Ville. Vang Pao wanted his officers to parlay with Neutralist counterparts in the area and prod them into vigorously supporting his efforts in the valley. Apparently, hesitant FAN units had failed to move west into specified positions near the Ville to reduce pressure on Vang Pao's troops, who were then taking a severe beating. As a result of their hesitancy, FAR units totally botched an initial coordinated attack calculated to seize prime objectives. As a result, many of Vang Pao's units suffered heavy casualties. Consequently, the operation faltered and became just another expensive probe. Vang Pao was understandably bitter over FAN's lack of any serious effort to buttress his eastern flank. It would not mark the last time Neutralist troops failed to support or honor obligations in proposed coordinated and integrated operations with the Meo.

Never overly trusting each other, especially since the August 1960 coup, the disparate forces drew even further apart.

Bill led the two-aircraft flight. Since the destination was close to Phou Kabo, where I had received my June "welcome aboard" hosing, I did not follow too closely. This proved a wise choice. While attempting to pass through a small notch in the hills, Zeitler had to deviate because of a blocking cloud mass. During the turn, three men abruptly appeared and opened fire with automatic weapons. The spray of bullets smacked into the helicopter and darted around Flight Mechanic Ben Naval. Bill immediately radioed me not to come the same way. Then he landed uphill on a heavily jungled knoll near a valley air strip. It was not far from where he was hit, for he could still hear the bad guys firing. Curiously, at the same time he also heard children chanting their lessons from a school near the top of the strip.

While I approached, Bill secured the engine to assess the damage. With fuel streaming from the belly, it was easy to infer that one or more fuel tanks were punctured. Therefore, not wanting to activate the electrical switch because of the streaming fuel and highly volatile fumes, he climbed into my cockpit to alert someone of the incident. After several attempts, he contacted Captain Don Teeters, who was above the clouds making his first flight upcountry.

A combination of landing upslope, which caused fuel to gravity flow aft to the sieve draining underneath the belly, necessitated fuel for return to base. Therefore, I went trolling for a barrel or two of gas so Billy could start his engine and RTB. Within twenty minutes, I discovered a red and white barrel of 115/145 aviation fuel at Padong. With benefit of the hoist mechanism, Lacsina loaded it into the cabin, and we returned to Phak Leung. After hand pumping a few gallons into the forward

tank, Billy started the engine while Ben continued fueling. I trailed Zeitler to Sam Tong, then went back to Long Tieng and continued the day's work supporting the Xieng Khouang operation.⁷

After gathering my sleeping bag and sundries, I departed Sam Tong late in the afternoon. I chose to fly directly south at altitude to save time and avoid questionable villages still not under government control. I cleared Ritaville Ridge at sunset (about 1735 hours), which allowed me to log twenty-seven minutes night flight. A first for me since being elevated to Captain, short night flights like this were permitted by the chief pilot in conjunction with a ferry from upcountry to Udorn.

During the trip home, I had the opportunity to reflect on the implications and my part in military combat during the past few days. Events occurring during the RON had really marked the beginning of my maturation process in Military Region Two. I was pleased, for after a steady diet of conducting Pop's innocuous USAID refugee missions, Vang Pao's Xieng Khouang Ville operation gave me a refreshing change, and reoriented my awareness and knowledge of area activity. Because of the old man's bluster and autocratic demeanor, I had naively half considered Buell **the** key honcho and sole player in the equation. Now I began to realize that Pop was not the primary boss man in the pecking order at all, but merely a subordinate to Long Tieng principals. Perhaps the folks across the ridgeline encouraged Buell's machinations to confuse and cover the true significance of the sister location. At any rate, now considerably more seasoned and in lieu of more senior personnel upcountry, I was tapped to conduct operations out of Site-20A. I hoped this would continue and I would measure up to the task.

⁷ CIA Information Cable, 01/02/64.
Bill Zeitler Interview, 09/01/01.



Sky lighted against clouds, a UH-34D en route to an undetermined destination.

Mike Jarina Collection.

IVS PERSONNEL

After Jensen and O'Connor completed erecting the school and teachers' houses, they built their own thatched house behind the warehouse and started a vegetable garden. Before that they had slept with the houseboys on folding cots in the smoky cooking area adjacent to the warehouse living-work area. During the period, seemingly over nothing in particular, Pop chewed them out several times for various reasons. It created such an aura of general unpleasantness that they were totally disgusted with their lot. When the job was completed, Pop decided neither IVS volunteer met **his** criteria for Americans working in Military Region Two. For the rest of his IVS tour, O'Connor moved to central and then south Laos before being recruited by the Agency. Jensen waited at the airstrip with his bag when a houseboy handed him a message from Vientiane indicating that he was to remain at Sam Tong. He never learned who had made the decision, or why, but it created an awkward working relationship between him and Pop that lasted several years. ⁸

⁸ Blaine Jensen Letters, #1, 02/13/96, 03/02/96, 03/17/96.
Joe Flipse Email, 05/14/97.

Ben Moore issued another comprehensive gun memorandum to all flight crews. The memo resulted from Louie Jones' shooting a mangy dog at the Asian Acres compound. This directive included standard claptrap about not possessing, storing, or preparing to ship a gun. This caused a little twinge in the Casterlin conscience, as in addition to the Ruger, I had the Thai rifle Howard Estes had sold to me. However, the feeling did not last long when I considered what had already happened to me upcountry.

It was the height of the rabies season and many wild dogs ranged freely throughout town. Most Thais did not particularly like dogs and some abused them. However, because of Buddhist beliefs that alleged that any animal, particularly canines, could host an ancestor's reincarnated spirit, they were reluctant to kill them. Upset at Lou's action, his Thai neighbors complained to the authorities. As Air America's chief representative, Ben had to explain the Company's position on discharging handguns in town to the mayor and provincial officials. Angry with his hat-in-hand chore, and with little other choice, he demanded the well-liked and respected Jones's resignation from Air America ¹

Probably upset at frequent repairs necessary to the Sopa Villa gate when careless water truck drivers damaged it delivering their loads, the landlord (of whose motives I was highly suspicious) installed a one-inch pipe to the house from the newly installed water main on airport road (as the town

¹ In later years, constantly shot at by enemy ground forces, for sarcastic purposes I tacked my copy of Moore's memorandum on the Club's cork bulletin board. It must have struck a management nerve, for someone immediately removed it.

grew, city limits were being pushed further south). I thought it would be outstanding to finally have running water from the town reservoir at Nong Prachak, but workers failed to join the pipes properly and contaminated material seeped into the lines. In the typical "right way, wrong way, and the Thai way," the line had to be exposed and repaired. Water clarity improved, but was degraded in quality by the time it reached the house. The liquid still required boiling to safely drink. I was right on the mark about this when later learning that the local USAF tested the product and found it only potable at the reservoir water point. Despite installation of the new system, water did not always flow adequately through the lines, particularly during the dry season when the lake was low or power failures happened in town. In cases like this, some Americans were without water for up to four weeks. I tried to plan for these predictable shortages by keeping my two water tanks--a total of 800 gallons--full in rear of the house.

Continuing utility problems in our backwoods society contributed to fluctuating electricity, especially at night when voltage dropped from 220 to ninety volts. If the neon light in the living room was not turned on well before dark, one had no florescent light that night. Even cranking the Sang Fah 220v, fifty to sixty-nine cycle, twenty ampere step-up transformer to the maximum ten setting barely kept the refrigerator operating. Much to the landlord's displeasure, one transformer had already burned out when the power surged. He replaced it, but cautioned me to be careful in the future. To forestall unit damage, an auditory signal was installed in the unit to alert an individual to turn the dial down, but one had to be present to accomplish this. There were rumors of dam construction in parts of the

country and the prospects of future reliable power. However, these reports were taken at face value in a land of mai pen lai.²

Udorn power was produced from two generators in an antiquated plant close to the prison. At times, electricity was either minimal or not available for up to a week when a generator was down for scheduled or unscheduled maintenance. Captain Herb Baker lived close to the electric plant that was also near the police station. Disgusted during one period of low power, he made an unannounced visit to the plant and discovered the reason: the drunken operator was asleep. What did Rudyard Kipling say about the Asian Brown? Something similar to, "east is east, west is west, and never the twain shall meet."

Earlier in the month, four months after I wrote to the Honda manufacturing plant in Japan, I received a letter from the Bangkok dealership indicating that they had received a crankshaft for me. Despite wanting the part, and needing to renew my Hong Kong visa and obtain some baht from the Bank of America branch, I had no desire to go to the dusty, congested city. Knowing Howard and the family were going on STO, I asked him to collect the part for me. When he returned, I took the bike and part to a repair shop located on the corner of the second circle and, with an independence not felt in some time, was soon back on the road.

The weather continued warm during the daytime and I ran Caesar behind the bike to the teachers' college and back to the house. Unfortunately, I had to cease this when I discovered his footpads became torn and bloody from the sharp laterite stones. In the early evening, large bugs necessitated wearing goggles to prevent blinding while traveling to the airfield. In addition to potential eye injury, one had to wear a long sleeve shirt or

² Mai Pen Lai: Literally it doesn't matter.

jacket because the insects released a white irritating substance. Some bikers were more susceptible to the resulting skin itch than others.

During this time of year, people used nocturnal insects in other ways. An electric line with an incorporated shielded light fixture stretched perpendicularly across the street at the intersection of Soi Wat Po and the main road. At dusk, neighborhood children gathered under the light and waited for large moth-like creatures drawn by the illumination to appear. Squealing with delight, they knocked them down with long poles. Then, in a party-like atmosphere, they tore the insects' wings off and popped the rest into their mouths. I was told that they were a delicacy, like Philippine baluts, but could never screw up enough courage to try one. ³

JUSMAG

On 22 November, Mike Marshall, flying a former Coast Guard ship, now numbered Hotel-17, departed Udorn for work in Bangkok with Kay and son Neill in the cockpit. They resided at the Plaza Hotel for about a month. While they were there, Tom Ward, Pop's assistant, arrived on R&R, and the family spent many hours talking to the intellectual Texan. In addition to all the extra bells and whistles, Mike's helicopter was equipped with a left-mounted external tank. The extended range enabled him and Flight Mechanic Johnny Sibal to fly a mission to Chiang Mai and then west to Mae Hong Son. Once there, he retrieved a native woman from a mountain village just inside the Burma border. Without a clue about the reason for the mission, he returned her to Chiang Mai.

³ Balut: An embryonic be-feathered duck egg, like dog meat, considered a delicacy in the Filipino culture.

Among many flights around Thailand, some included supplying the Jansky and Bailey site outside Bangkok. The contractor used this sensitive location to test and develop improved radio jungle wave propagation electronic units for USG. Known as the J&B site, ⁴ personnel and supplies were generally loaded on the railroad tracks adjoining the monopoly tobacco warehouse. Located in the center of a remote jungle area, the confined landing zone afforded only one approach and departure path over high trees. On one trip, Mike experienced a few anxious moments when he clipped the trees and dinged rotor blade caps. Headquarters Taipei received word of the incident and Mike was jacked up about the minor damage, but, because of Abadie's intervention, he survived termination. ⁵

The same day Marshall departed for Bangkok, Jerry McEntee and I conducted three Company required night proficiency landings and ADF approaches around the airfield. Probably because of Hotel-16's untimely loss and maintenance problems, I ended the month with twenty fewer hours than in October. Who knew what future flight time would be, for complicating any accurate projection was the fact that pilots previously on leave were returning daily.

LOSS OF A PRESIDENT

While I was slumbering on my lumpy mattress, President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas.

⁴ Originally designated Tango-56, then T-707.

⁵ Mike Marshall Letter, 10/10/92.

Mike Marshall Emails, 08/02/99, 08/05/99, 08/14/99, 09/11/99, 09/18/99.

Mike Marshall November-December 1963 Flight Time Records.

I did not learn of the tragedy until Saturday morning while visiting the Estes' residence. ⁶ The minute I walked in the door, from the prevailing somber atmosphere, I knew something was terribly wrong. A teary-eyed Deanie, who had been listening to a Voice of America special broadcast, gave me the meager details. Like all who heard the sad news, I was profoundly shocked. Although not sharing the Kennedy Administration's political persuasion, I generally respected the President, and most certainly the highest office in the land. Actually, I was angry, and believed that the nation could not condone killings of top leaders and long survive as a superpower. Furthermore, the issue smacked of banana republic politics. The cowardly act appeared another senseless and disruptive influence during that bizarre month, which added yet another negative dimension to the witches' brew of world politics that confronted us. Nevertheless, I was confident that the well-seasoned democratic process of American government would ensure orderly succession under the intelligent guidelines designed by our founding fathers. The only question for us in Air America was how the new head of state, Texan Lyndon Baines Johnson, would prosecute Southeast Asia's monumental problems. ⁷

LBJ

Unfortunately, during his short time in office, neither the President nor the CIA had briefed Vice President Johnson regarding important details of USG's role in the undeclared war to counter communism in South Vietnam and Laos. Moreover,

⁶ The reader should remember that Thailand was twelve-hours ahead of the East Coast time zone.

⁷ Years later when I lived and worked in Louisiana, I discovered that Alan Campbell, the man I worked for, knew principals who were remotely involved in the Kennedy assassination. As a result, he was subpoenaed to testify before the Garrison Commission.

Johnson had not been particularly active in foreign affairs or involved in the 1962 Geneva Conference tailored to neutralize and restore the coalition government in Laos under the guidance of Souvanna Phouma. However, while still serving as a senior Congressional member, Chairman of the Senate Aeronautical and Space Sciences Committee, and later as Senate Majority Leader, Johnson had received a number of intelligence briefings. He met once with Allen Dulles while a vice-presidential candidate, but neither Agency leaders Dulles or John McCone, had bothered to keep him informed regarding critical intelligence matters during Kennedy's tenure. Therefore, Vice President, Johnson had paid little attention to intelligence reports. Those his office received contained Agency Current Intelligence Bulletins, abbreviated forms of the more highly classified information distributed to the President, his Secretaries of State and Defense, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Over the next three weeks, the Director attempted to bring LBJ up to speed, briefing him on the world's trouble spots, CIA covert actions, and technical collection programs (mainly the SR-71 reconnaissance spy plane project).

At the time of Jack Kennedy's death, USG policy had failed miserably to either curtail fighting or create a truly neutral Laos. Incomprehensibly, although ostensibly involved in the same government, the Pathet Lao armed wing and the RLA engaged in low-level warfare against each other for territory and strategic advantage. The Pathet Lao and their Vietnamese stiffeners occupied a majority of the northern and central highlands, and the Vietnamese utilized trails through Laos to South Vietnam

without opposition.⁸

That same morning in our Southeast Asian time zone, Operations assigned Wayne Knight to deliver a CIC ship to Vientiane. Arriving long before the CIC office opened, he repaired to the Air America restaurant for coffee. As he walked to the ICC office to complete the aircraft transfer, he noticed a large note on the Air America bulletin board announcing that the President had been shot. Believing this to be an extremely sick joke, perpetrated by a drunken sot, he removed the notice from the board and shredded it to pieces. Continuing to the office with the helicopter logbook, he encountered the Canadian Major in charge, who asked Wayne if he had heard the news. Knight, still unaware of the horror, asked what news. Breaking down, the major informed Wayne of the details, as he knew them. When Wayne returned to Udorn he discovered that no one had heard about the shooting.⁹

The sad news reached other parts of Southeast Asia. Jim and Bonnie Coble roomed at the Hong Kong International Hotel while on STO. Even the bosses got time off. About 0500 hours, the re-diffusion (hard wired radio) came on a couple of hours before the normal time to report the dismal news regarding President Kennedy. Jim immediately snapped awake and listened to the radio for two hours. When they left the hotel, people of all nationalities stopped him on the street to convey their condolences. Not knowing what global consequences might evolve

⁸ Edward Keefer, *Foreign Relations, Summary*. John Bowman, 63. Helgerson, *CIA Briefings of Presidential Candidates 1952-1992: Into Politics with Kennedy and Johnson* Chapter 3 (Washington: Center for the Study of Intelligence).

⁹ EW Knight Email, 02/17/01.

from the incident, he left for the airport and caught the first available flight to Thailand. ¹⁰

CURIOUS THINGS

Sang had been absent since I returned from upcountry. I came to expect this, as she suffered from the endemic and addictive "Thai disease," so prevalent among many Thai women, and especially those from her level of society. Most Asians enjoyed gambling, specifically card games. ¹¹

This time, however, Sang returned home after a lengthy pilgrimage to visit what newspapers reported as the "miracle baby of the northeast." The story she conveyed to me in broken English provided additional insight into the gullible nature of the northeast Thai people. Apparently, the mother of a now twenty-day-old child had looked pregnant, but then not at all just before the birth. I had never heard of such a circumstance, but assumed that there must be a medical reason for the condition. Anyway, all the regional spirits and omens coalesced at the time of birth and made it the talk of the area. The event was not without commercial aspects, for Sang arrived clutching a medicine bottle containing special water provided by the family at a price.

Long believing that all things are possible in life, and that much will eventually be revealed, I still recognized that the Isan Thai were largely an illiterate and superstitious people. Thailand was a country with a strong, well-organized

¹⁰ Jim Coble Email.

¹¹ Thai disease: I liberally employed the term "Thai Disease" to describe females who frequently gamed, at times all night or for days. More often than not, they lost everything because of gross incompetence or cheating players. Constantly in debt, many hocked prized jewelry consisting mainly of rings, gold bracelets, and necklaces.

Buddhist religion. However, superstition and magic also weighed heavily in the acts of some holy men who told fortunes, or provided idols or potions to reflect an agenda, such as causing a man to love a woman, or placing an evil curse on someone. Such things were difficult to believe, but, as Sang pointed out and I observed, the cemetery at Wat Po abounded with such talismans placed beside gravestones by ardent believers.

Conjuring, fortune telling, astrology, and other curious and puzzling items pervaded the Thai society, confusing the uninitiated Westerner. Over time, I gathered bits and pieces of information concerning such activities, discounting many as hearsay or mere fabrication. Two included sleep gas that thieves released under a stilt house to render the occupants helpless, and doctored pork products, which caused the American who dined on pork treated with a poisoned substance to kill him the next time he ate the meat. *Preposterous, but who could really be sure? Did not amazing events happen in the Orient?* The more one heard the incredible tales, the more credible they became.

RARE HIRINGS

Just when our group believed a decent wage was at last attainable, other factors intervened to squash this notion and slash our flight time. Much to everyone's surprise, the company hired two additional pilots, Marius Burke and Art White. The men's arrival countered the projected transfer of Sam Jordon and Dick Crafts to the Helio Courier program, and corresponding increase in our flight time. ¹²

Moreover, just as the war was heating up there were disconcerting rumors that the number of hours flown would be reduced. Unfortunately, our exposure to negative publicity

¹² Sam Jordon remained in the helicopter program and Dick Craft's transfer to fixed wing did not occur until much later.

remained high in diplomatic circles, and politics crept into the equation when ICC Vientiane complained that Air America aircraft, particularly the former Marine Corps helicopters, were not only hauling rice upcountry. This was gleefully expounded upon by the English version of Radio Hanoi, which referred to us as "capitalist running-dog lackeys." It was a one-way diatribe, for no one ever seemed to complain about the Pathet Lao and Vietnamese pressure on the RLA and Meo troops, or the inhumane atrocities committed on hill tribe villagers. Where were protests of these actions? The ICC and its so-called centrists and left-leaning representatives tended to be a do-nothing joke. Everyone was aware of this, but Accord adherents wanted the unit to remain in Laos as a modicum of good will and a potential buffer between opposing forces.

MARIUS BURKE

The Company officially hired Marius Burke in October.¹³ Because the pilot requirement in the field was low, the check-in process expanded and he spent about three weeks at the head shed attending briefings and performing other mundane activities.

After arriving in Udorn, Burke's first impressions of the Air America base were positive. On the 29th, he was scheduled for a standard appraisal flight around the airstrip with Wayne Knight, a casual acquaintance while undergoing flight training at Pensacola. Wayne did not fly with Marius again until early February.

Much like Howard and me in September 1962, Marius received a cold reception from nineteen baffled H-34 line pilots upon his arrival in Udorn. Offering a bit of hyperbole, pilots indicated

¹³ A pilot's hire date began when he arrived in Taipei, not Udorn.

that they were only flying ten-hours per month and his untimely appearance would reduce this to nine. Marius carried a small black briefcase, which looked suspicious to gun-shy crewmembers who believed he was certainly affiliated with the CIA or a Company spy. Because I had experienced much the same chilly treatment, I went out of my way to be friendly and helpful to the new employee.

Officially based at New River from 1959 to 1963, Burke had flown several U.S. Marine Corps helicopters. Like Nick Burke, he had served in the facility H-37 squadron, HMR-461, for most of his tour. As with other New River squadrons, his was top heavy with ten majors ¹⁴ and two Lieutenant Colonels. Derived from a previous fixed wing era, most were older men who possessed little helicopter experience. As a new second lieutenant and junior officer in the squadron, Marius hustled to fly 500 hours. Then, amassing more time than any other person, he became the squadron instructor pilot.

As had others tapped from New River to fly temporary duty assignments (TDY), Marius had participated in Project Mercury, our second space program in the quest to catch and overcome the Soviets. He described the group's main duties as SAR and capsule retrieval after splash down.

All H-34s in the program were equipped with engines of less than 200 hours, so, in his mind, there was no excuse to lose Gus Grissom's capsule. If a pod filled with water, he maintained that it was still buoyant, and that Grissom's could have been held in place until underwater demolition team (UDT) men fitted an inflation ring around the device. Instead, the pilot, observing an illuminated engine chip detector button panicked, and chose to release his precious cargo into the watery depths.

¹⁴ One was Ernie Brace, who was shot down and captured in the Beng Valley during May 1965.

Marius believed that even if challenged with engine failure, the pilot still had the option to settle safely into the water from a low hover. ¹⁵

Another Burke temporary duty (TDY) was spent at Guantanamo Bay in a detachment of two HRS helicopters and crews were charged with a fence security mission. They were there a long time, with no R&R or liberty trips away from the confined base. The Navy was not helpful, so Marius considered ways to accomplish a trip. The nearest friendly land was located 215 miles over water on the island of Haiti. The HRS had a range of 200 miles and weak navigational equipment, but, being young and foolish, he considered attempting a trip. About this time, a carrier arrived in the bay to conduct ship to shore maneuvers. During the operation, an H-37 from his squadron suffered a collapsed landing gear. Since the carrier was departing the following day, the commanding officer left the machine with Marius for repair and safekeeping. The twin Ball brothers were left to attempt repairs. When they had the ship fixed in two days, Marius considered using the helicopter for a Haiti trip. With two 300-gallon drop tanks on either side of the fuselage and mainline tanks full, Marius loaded his people and launched for Haiti. Once reaching the point of no return and transferring fuel, he discovered the landing mishap had damaged the transfer pump in the port tank. Before reaching the island, they flew several nervous minutes on the twenty-minute low-level fuel warning light. The trip was rewarding and well worth the effort.

Before this, the Washington office had called offering him a job with Air America, but at the time, it did not sound appealing and he was happy in the Corps.

¹⁵ Before this incident and leaving New River for Okinawa, the Author talked to the individual about the Mercury program.

Shortly before his separation date, events relating to the Cuban Missile Crises froze Burke in place. During the fall of 1962, with his service obligation completion date scheduled for 30 October, Marius was in the process of checking out of his squadron. The task was nearly completed when his Commanding Officer, E.J. Cope, called him into his office waving a flash message from Headquarters Marine Corps informing him that his service tour was involuntarily extended. Unperturbed, Marius immediately began processing back into the squadron. Within a day or so, a clarifying message arrived stating that "needs of the service" required any Marine due to be separated after 1 November be automatically extended for an indefinite period; if scheduled to leave before that date, one could still exercise that right. Since Marius satisfied the latter provision, he entered Cope's office saying, *"It looks like I'll be checking out once again."* However, the commanding officer, an excellent public relations man, talked him into extending for another tour. There were other factors that influenced him in this decision, one being that the new helicopter troop ship Okinawa was fully air-conditioned, so he struck a deal to be part of the ship's first wave. They did go to Cuba, but not to war.

Now that he was in Udorn, Burke moved in with Scratch Kanach, Jerry McEntee, and Billy Z. The residence was in the same three-house compound where the Nick Burke family and ASE technician John Sterry had resided earlier in the year. The brother of Air America clinic nurse Boots Bong, was a doctor who owned the compound and the two story, four-bedroom house where the men resided. Burke thought it kind of the pilots to allocate the lower bedroom to him while they lived on the upper story--that is, until he decided to rearrange the bed. When he reached under and began pulling on the bed, a cobra slithered out. He jumped back in panic and hurried into the kitchen to retrieve a

machete to commence battle. He returned just as Mister Snake slipped through a crack in the floor. He informed Boot's brother, who nailed a board over the crack. That was great, but there were other open cracks visible, and as rats scurried around the wall, he fully expected to encounter the reptile again.

Burke began training immediately. Within days of the snake encounter, he arose early and began pulling on his boots. He became a little excited when he discovered that during the night a snake had shed his skin in a boot. After this incident, he never saw evidence of a snake in the room again. However, he suspected Kanach and the playful Zeitler knew the situation and had given him the room on purpose.

Before being upgraded to Captain in February, Burke flew with most of the resident pilots. During early orientation, he flew with Elmer Munsell out of Sam Tong. They performed considerable flying the first day, and Elmer never offered Marius the controls. Toward the end of the day, Burke became irritated at being ignored. The following day began with the same routine so, during the morning he asked Munsell if he was ever going to let him fly. Shocked, Elmer looked at Marius and retorted, *"Oh, OK, you want to fly."* The rest of the time upcountry Elmer never assumed control of the ship, and the fatigued new pilot wished he had not said anything. Like others, he found it difficult to learn the area.

He discovered Sam Tong villagers pleasant, and over time, he ate at several native huts. During his first meal, a pot containing the main meal of rice and meat sat on the bamboo table. He used the standard native procedure of hand dipping to obtain his ration of food. Hungry, he found the mixture palatable. Then he dipped again and found a tiny monkey hand

embedded in the rice. The food was always hot and he never got sick, but he did eat his share of peanut butter sandwiches.

Because of the dearth of helicopter flying and no need for near-term upgrading to Captain, Marius returned to Taiwan to attend school to obtain a Chinese license in anticipation of flying the Bell at Udorn. ¹⁶

¹⁶ Marius Burke Interviews at Author's House.
EW Knight Email, 06/18/00.

The issue of Air America's presence in Laos, and negative connotations related to the Lao political stage assumed greater proportions toward the end of the year. Communist politicians had always maintained Air America was a CIA proprietary, that Company aircraft delivered supplies, guns, and ammunition to forces which opposed indigenous Pathet Lao forces, and was engaged in all sorts of clandestine activity.

With Souvanna Phouma's urging, a solution was sought by the Vientiane Embassy and Washington. Long recognized as a paramilitary instrument of USG, Air America's image and sizeable participation in the war continued to be subjected to intense bashing by Lao politicians, the ICC, and communist adherents. More important, because of its prior support of Meo counterinsurgency elements, and long after signing of the 1962 Geneva Accords, Air America continued to be a distinct political liability for the Neutralist Souvanna Phouma government. This was particularly the case following the adverse and embarrassing publicity garnered after the September C-46 shoot down.

Without stripping the vital air operation of its capacity to distribute essential items with its remaining twenty-one cargo planes, reduced over time from the original fifty, the Prime Minister requested the U.S. State Department to locate an alternate company, or at the very least, effect a name change. This would go a long way toward diminishing negative attitudes toward western aid in the country. Therefore, message traffic flowed between Vientiane and Washington seeking a viable resolution of the problem.

The subject remained a thorny issue. Realizing that a long-term answer to the problem was required, but one still achieving

USG policy and goals in the country, State perceived some merit in changing the Air America name, compared to the political gain in switching to a new company. However, such a move would be difficult, for Air America was already in place and well established as a functioning and efficient airline. Any change had to be cost effective and immediately workable, so a reluctant State Department moved slowly toward that direction. Measures were proffered that included leasing or granting even more planes to Lao control. Training additional transport pilots to increase RLAF transport capability was already underway to reduce American involvement, activity, and accusations of Accord violations. To stimulate utilization of RLAF planes, Air America cargo planes would conduct no military flights (clandestine flights from out of country locations were not discussed), and USAID had already rejected all FAR requests for Air America military and non-military air supply.

However, not much progress had been generated toward turning over additional air delivery responsibility to the RLAF because of its deficient infrastructure and lack of trained, competent personnel. Furthermore, no central Lao air command existed to direct transport loading or dispatch of assets like the now smooth-running ATOG. There was no pool of trained pilots, or maintenance facility, and considerable motivational deficiency pervaded the outfit. Some thought was given to passing the torch to a proposed Air Lao/Royal Air Lao company, but merger talks over the past fourteen months had not succeeded. Of course, collaborating over continuing clandestine flights and any other circumventing of the Accords.

Souvanna Phouma realistically understood the myriad of organizational issues involved for any company in delivering food to 100,000 backcountry people. Despite Air America's

presence, and past associations with warring factions, he did not object to near term current air support.

Ambassador Unger concluded his written remarks on the subject to Washington declaring:

"AAM should be replaced by a new U.S. commercial aviation company, free from pre-Geneva Accord connection with Laos."

He went on to specify:

*"The company would acquire in-country assets; aircraft; ground equipment; parts; unexpired USAF contracts; and key personnel...Bird and Son would remain as **the** cargo carrier for the RLG (it was preferable to have U.S. presence divided between two firms than to consolidate into one more vulnerable enterprise)...The new company would operate primarily as a heavy cargo carrier and also handle most U.S. mission support activities...but at transfer subject to reduction in the degree of U.S. involvement and when feasible, reduction in the total number of personnel. The main policy of the new company would make maximum use of non-American air and ground personnel and expect reduction in total operations as Lao flying capabilities increased..."*

On a more sensitive issue, he believed that American civilians should continue to crew military and relief cargo flights into denied areas. In the case of the Meo, despite being unprepared to wholly support them in the future, there was no alternative but to continue fulfilling U.S. commitments to the group.

With pressure for change subsiding, the issue was tabled

until spring. ¹

MR-3

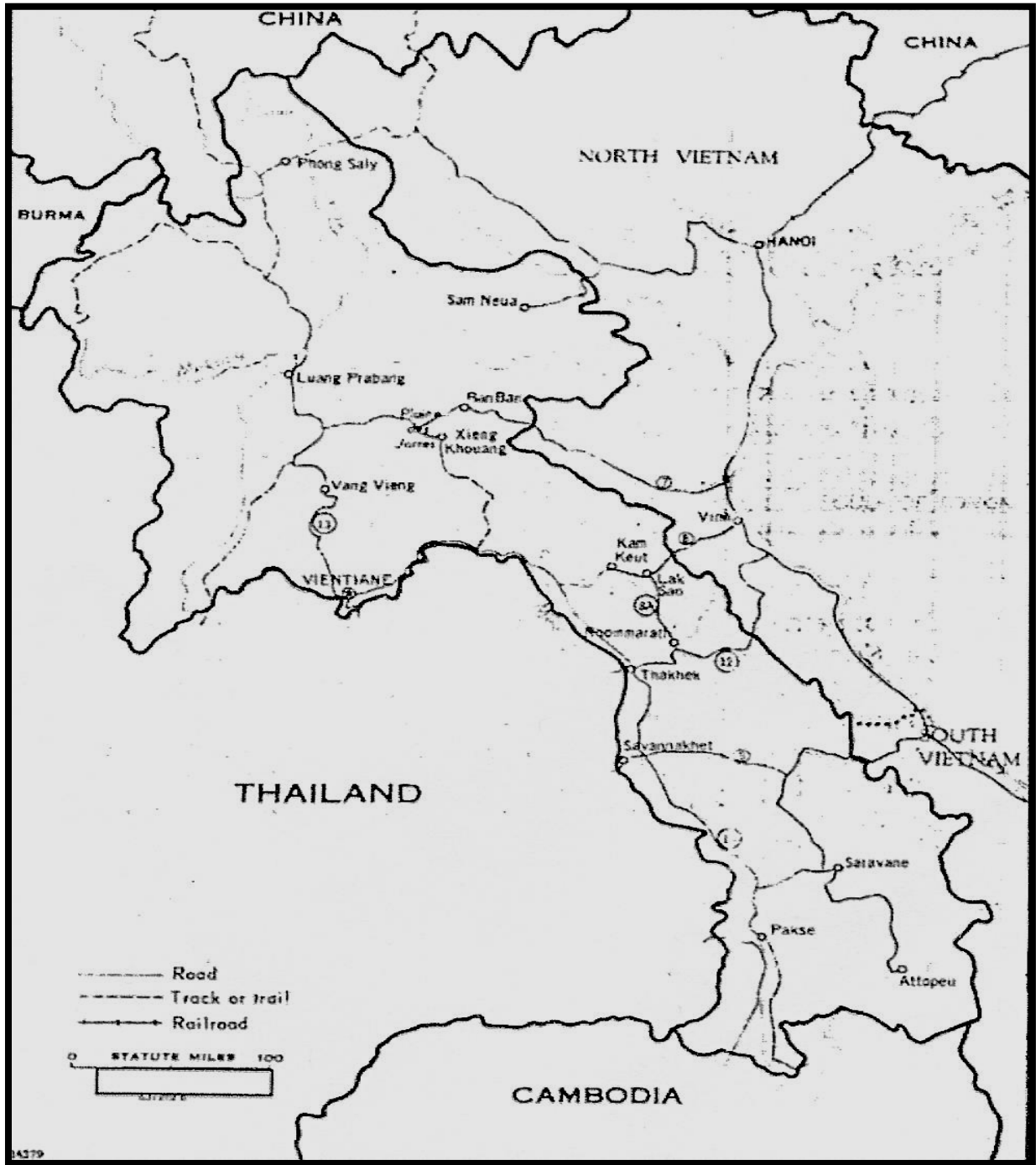
FAR and FAN forces continued to pressure Pathet Lao units in central Laos. Hoping to recover lost territory and curtail enemy supply to south Laos and South Vietnam, government plans went forward in November for a joint FAR-FAN thrust from Thakhet across the upper Na Kay Plateau Panhandle in Military Region Three. During late November and early December, government forces, reinforced by a Savannakhet airborne battalion, moved north from Nhommarath with elements moving up Route-8 to Lak Sao, an enemy depot on a supply route to the Nhommarath region, and toward Nape Pass. Agency trained irregulars led the way, destroying bridges northeast of the target area. With FAN approaching from the south on 6 December, guerrillas captured two enemy 105mm howitzers. However, efforts to overcome a Vietnamese battalion near the airstrip failed.

To thwart an expected Pathet Lao counterattack, thirty miles west FAR seized and occupied Kham Keut, a Pathet Lao strong point at the western end of Route-8, and then moved northeast toward the border. ²

Within a week, the enemy vigorously reacted. Pathet Lao and two Vietnamese battalions moved down Route-8. For the time, the government road block held.

¹ Douglas Blaufarb.
LBJ Library, Unger-State, 11/27/63.
Victor Anthony, 93-94.
Thomas Ahern (CIA History Staff) *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos, 1961-1973* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2006) 177.
John Maffre, *Washington Post and Times Herald, No Frills Called for on Spook Airline*, 11/13/66.

² Central Intelligence Bulletin, Daily Brief, Laos, Right-wing and neutralist forces continue to make gains against communist military positions, 12/04/63.



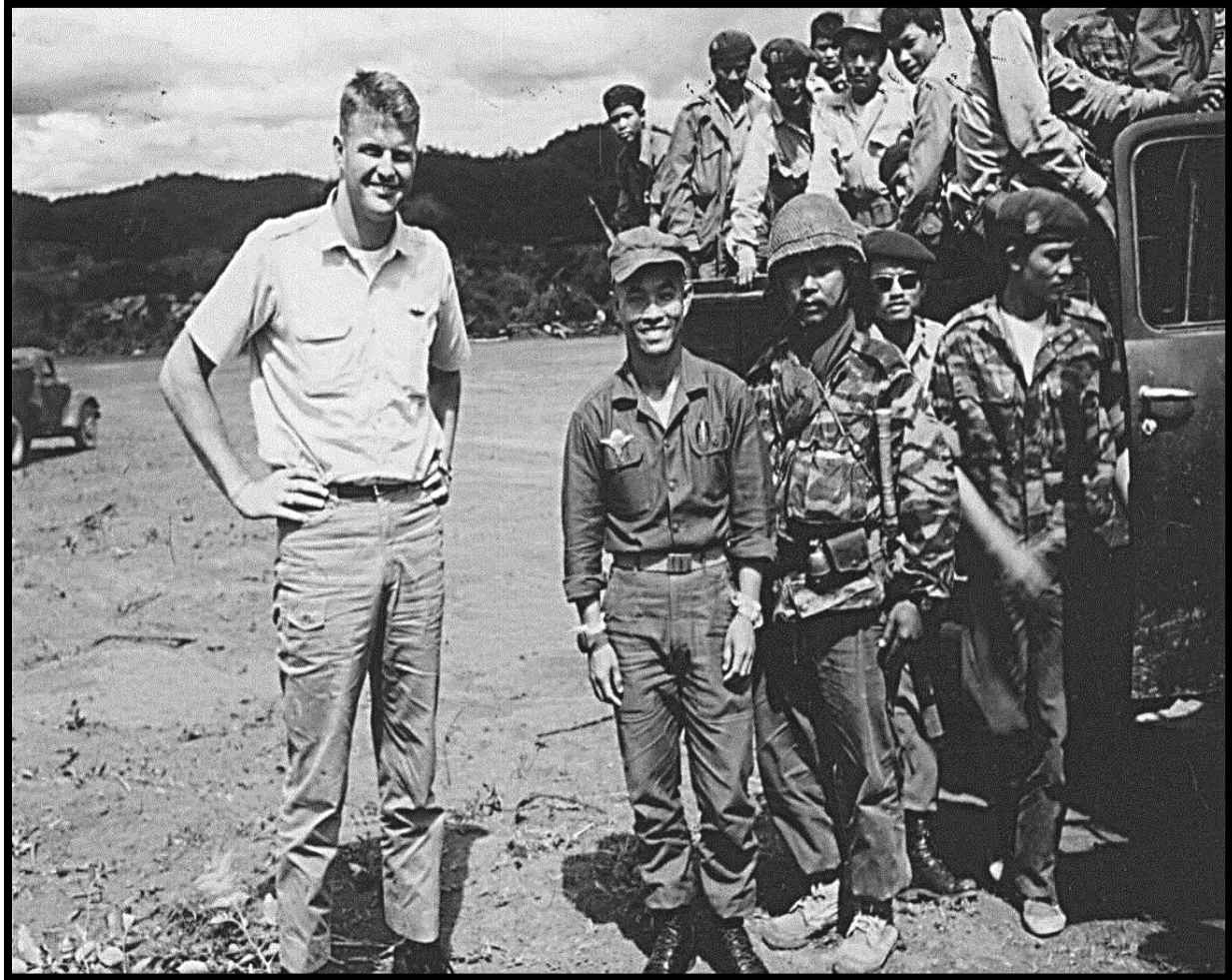
CIA 12/20/63 map depicting the area of the Route-8 RLG offensive in central Laos.

North Vietnamese involvement in Laos was mainly focused on protecting their substantial investment there, and aiding the Pathet Lao with temporary military forces, particularly when they were unable to counter Lao army offensives. Therefore, although deemed as initially a successful operation in Military Region Three by the RLG, by mid-December three North Vietnamese battalions, reacting to a RLA force so close to North Vietnam, were in place and pushed FAR units back from the border region. After the dreaded enemy entered the battle, the government operation soon deteriorated, with Lak Sao (VS-49) under heavy pressure, and the Kham Keut garrison fleeing south. By the end of January, Pathet Lao-North Vietnamese units were again in total control of the eastern region.

From the hills, road watch teams continued to report enemy supply convoys moving into Laos from North Vietnam. This evidenced a communist determination to retain a capability for military initiatives at a time of their choosing.

On the last day of November Pathet Lao commander General Singkapo, asserted that USG and Rightists were attempting to scuttle Neutralist-Pathet Lao negotiations. His words were a pipe dream, for a 3 December meeting on the Plain of Jars between Kong Le and Singkapo ended in heated recriminations. Still, the Pathet Lao had not attempted a major counter offensive, and seemed interested in dialogue between Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma and Prince Souphannouvong.

FAN units which captured Vang Vieng moved sixteen-miles north toward Mounk Kassy, and controlled Route-13 from Vientiane



Captain Mike Marshall towering over Neutralist (FAN) commander General Kong Le, his officers, and his men.

Marshall Collection circa 1963.

to that point. ³

VICHIT

Thai communications specialist Vichit Mingrachata, originally from Chiang Mai, had learned his electronics trade in the Thai Navy. In the fall, he worked for USAID telecom in a large building next to the Mekong on the airport road. Following the RLA push east, the pressure on the Thakhet area lessened, and as it was also the dry season, Vichit was dispatched to the town for three weeks to work with the only division of the Lao Bureau of Public Roads (BPR) sponsored by AID. His stay was quiet and he lived and worked in the USAID building on the riverbank. The population of about 10,000 included many Vietnamese, some Chinese, Lao, and French. With Nakhon Phanom directly across the river, it was easy for people to travel in both directions, especially to Thakhet, where gambling was legal. During the period, the improved Route-13 roadbed stretched north to the Paksane airstrip. In addition, BPR was just beginning to lay down a laterite road toward Vientiane. ⁴

NECESSARY CHANGES

December marked significant Theater decisions in both communist and Western camps that would have far reaching implications not only to the war, but eventually to our helicopter operations.

³ Ken Conboy, 101-102.
Vientiane-State Message, 11/30/63.
CIA Current Intelligence Weekly Summary, OCI #0309/63, Copy #77,
12/06/63.
SNIE 14.3-64, The Outlook for North Vietnam, 03/04/64.
Tom Ahern, 176-177.

⁴ Interviews with Vichit Mingrachata at Udorn, Thailand,
03/01/95, 11/30/96.



A portion of Thakhet, Laos, as seen across the Mekong River from Nakhon Phanom (LS-55), Thailand. To the right, just beyond the trees, limestone karsts impinge on the town.

John Lesnak Collection.

Throughout 1963, North Vietnamese leaders sent mostly South Vietnamese military, political, security, economic, financial, and educational specialists to the south. After five months of covert fact-finding missions along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and within areas of South Vietnam, Colonel Bui Tin concluded that Viet Cong forces were poorly organized, lacked leadership, and were unprepared for a long campaign. Based largely on his observations, a meeting in Hanoi between members of the Ninth Congress of the Central Committee of the Lao Dong Party discussed the "Trail" and its future status in a protracted war. They decided that the balance of forces in the south required immediate change. Without introducing intact military units at this time, the North would support and expand Viet Cong participation in the war with the purpose of eventually launching an extensive offensive against the South Vietnamese government and its armed forces. Such goals would require improvement of the Lao trail system. ⁵

SOG

During early 1956 the Vietnamese Observation Group, later known as the covert Study and Observation Group (SOG), operated by the CIA with Special Forces trainers, was formed in South Vietnam to clandestinely send teams across the 17th parallel into the North for the purpose of harassment. By 1961, the National Security Council approved unconventional warfare operations that, in addition to North Vietnam missions, called for infiltration into Southeast Laos with the goal of locating

⁵ Phillip Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History 1946-1975* (New York: Oxford University, 1988) 306, 311.
John Bowman ed., *The World Almanac of the Vietnam War* (New York: Bison, 1985) 63.

and attacking North Vietnamese Army bases and logistical arteries. The teams were mostly unsuccessful in these endeavors. In December 1963, the SOG program, coded Operation Switchback, reverted from CIA to military control. Except for Laos, where CIA worked hand in hand with the ambassador, this move became part of a replacement of CIA leadership of clandestine paramilitary operations throughout the world. SOG was established in Saigon as a Joint Unconventional Warfare Task Force for North Vietnam and Laos. The Agency was asked to contribute to the program in the political and propaganda areas and CIA officers were attached to the military program. When Defense Secretary Robert McNamara visited Saigon in December, and learned that enemy infiltration along the Lao-Cambodian border was alarmingly high, he requested U-2 photographs of the entire border areas. RF-101Cs also participated in infiltration surveillance. Supporting the on and off Able Mable air reconnaissance program, USAF 2nd Air Division in Saigon dispatched two RF101C planes to Don Muang for a week to conduct photo missions in Thailand. Since tactical reconnaissance was still restricted over Laos and Cambodia, and appeared likely to remain so, the air division targeted seventeen critical border areas to photograph from South Vietnamese airspace. Equipped with long focal length cameras--four housed in the nose, and two in a fuselage bay--the Voodoo pilots photographed their objectives. By month's end, using vertical and oblique techniques, they had photographed eighty-five percent of the border. ^{6 7}

⁶ However, with more challenges ahead and restrictions waiting to be lifted, it was not until 1965 that new and more accurate maps appeared in our inventory.

⁷ William Greenhalgh, *The Air Force in Southeast Asia: The RF-101 Voodoo 1961-1970* (Office of Air Force History, 1979) 50-51.

INTELLIGENCE GATHERING IN MR-3

Advised and supported by young CIA Case Officers, Mike Deuel and Richard Holm's ground intelligence teams, consisting of villagers and PARU teams, continued to accumulate information relating to the enemy activity on eastern trails encompassing Route-8 between Lak So and Nhommarath.⁸ This road watch effort expanded within Military Region Three into Military Region Four in the summer when Deuel transferred to Pakse. Not yet supported by Air America helicopters, to conceal movement, the teams walked long distances to their destinations. The Defense Secretary praised current trail watch operations, especially the information collected, and recommended the program's expansion.⁹

Ambassador Unger harbored reservations about political ramifications of employing out-of-country personnel for intelligence gathering. In a dialogue from Vientiane to State, Unger stated:

"The need for intelligence resulted in stationing people along the Lao-Vietnamese border. Small Kha commando units wearing FAR uniforms already provided intelligence and harassed NVA movement. That since General Phoumi met with General Minh at Ban Saen, Thailand, for discussions on the subject, supply of these units from Thailand has been resumed."

To achieve greater efficiency in real time intelligence gathering, Phoumi wanted Minh to dispatch South Vietnamese military intelligence teams dressed in FAR uniforms to Savannakhet, Paksane, Attopeu, and Saravane for liaison with FAR counterparts and communications with South Vietnam.

⁸ The previous year, Ed Reid and I had ferried the Agency men to Udorn from Nakhon Phanom town the day after Christmas.

⁹ John Bowman, 64.
Ken Conboy, 119.

Despite counsel from Embassy Country Team members, Unger, questioning what South Vietnamese commando teams could currently accomplish on the Ho Chi Minh Trails, seriously opposed overt border crossing operations into Laos. Thinking like a politician, he believed that any such operation would eventually be exposed as a breach of the Geneva Accords.

The ambassador later followed with a cable to State stating that requesting Lao agreement for cross-border operations would cause repercussions for the Prime Minister. The country would be better served by less invasive intelligence gathering of CIA's "Hardnose," a program that could perform a better job without complications. Within a week, concurring with Unger's messages, McNamara indicated that the Department of Defense would not recommend cross border operations because political risks would exceed probable results. He reiterated that effective CAS (Controlled American Source, euphemism for CIA) intelligence gathering operations along the Lao border should be expanded.¹⁰

T-28S

Another facet in the evolving Lao war that had far reaching implications, related to the fledgling T-28 program, particularly the subject of replacement machines. There was always an urgent requirement to find additional planes. In theory, six T-28s would permit two flights of three planes to maintain a ready status for immediate action and tend to dispel any notion that the planes were not available during crises. Additional replacement ships would aid pilot training and proficiency.

¹⁰ LBJ Library, Leonard Unger-State Messages, 12/9, 14/63; Foreign Relations-State 12/21/63.

In the final analysis for the year, Vientiane cabled Washington that the station was unable to fund replacement T-28s within the projected 1964 fiscal budget. However, the Bangkok Embassy suggested that Thai T-28s could be placed in ready status and made available to the Royal Lao Air Force for training flights in Thailand. ¹¹

During the same time period, CINCPAC-PACAF's Admiral Felt recommended that Secretary McNamara order a T-28 Air Commando detachment from the USAF Special Air Warfare Center, Eglin Air Force Base in Mary Ester, Florida, deployed to Udorn as soon as possible (ASAP). Ambassador Unger concurred. This proposal first surfaced during a June Administration policy reassessment. The unit would provide realistic operational experience to RLAF crews and afford a ready force to augment the RLAF if required. However, the customary lead time coordinating and forming the unit prevented actual movement until spring. ¹²

The proposed T-28 program in Udorn was discussed at Air America management levels late in 1963. Ben Moore briefed Captain Jim Coble and Jim heard vague mention of it in Vientiane, which tended to corroborate Ben's information. ¹³

¹¹ LBJ Library, Unger to State, 12/26/63.

¹² State Message.
Ken Conboy, 108.
Victor Anthony, 93.

¹³ Jim Coble Emails, 04/22/02, 04/23/02.

The Udorn annual provincial fair in City Park opened at the end of the first week in December. With Udorn moving slowly into the 20th century, the fair had expanded, and improved transportation shuttled many more people to the area. This year, a shooting gallery and motorcycles racing inside a large barrel-shaped enclosure had been added. A girly show held little appeal to one who had seen it all. Preying on human affliction, in what became a popular attraction, a hydrocephalic baby was on view. ¹ It affected my sensibilities to see the unfortunate infant exhibited and crassly exploited by the mother. Off to one side, local Thai Army personnel displayed the latest rolling stock, a distinct improvement over those items the previous year. Noisy from hawkers shouting into bullhorns, garish beyond imagination, and dusty from a myriad of people tramping between display tents, I quickly wearied of the scene and departed.

With the murder of Colonel Leuang Kong Vongsa in Vientiane, assassinations continued as a political tool to control events. Rumors of a 6 December Neutralist coup, calculated to overthrow the FAR and police in Vientiane, encouraged troops of police Colonel Siho and General Kouprasith to muster all hands for immediate action. However, within hours, embassy officials discounted any tangible evidence of a coup attempt. ²

Two days later, Johnny Sibal and I deadheaded to Wattay Airport to ferry an ICC helicopter to Udorn for a maintenance inspection. All was calm at the airport so, after retrieving the logbook and receiving clearance, we launched south. CIC-6 was

¹ Hydrocephalic: A disease creating a distorted head.

² LBJ Library, Vientiane Information Report, 12/05/63.



A pavilion located not far from one entrance to Udon City Park. The park contained a small zoo and the annual provincial fair occurred there in early December.

Author Collection.

one of three helicopters with boosted throttles that were delivered to the organization as a replacement for a ship previously lost on the Plain of Jars. After Billy P's disastrous "backward auto" incident in Hotel-16, no one cried any tears about losing another similarly configured aircraft.

THE THAI PRIME MINISTER CHECKS OUT

Discounting what Bangkok newspapers continuously reported, the prediction of Sarit's son was accurate, and the feared Thanat died at one of his country houses on the eighth. An Air America helicopter pilot retrieved the remains and ferried them to Lumpini Park, where a large crowd waited to pay homage to the former ruler. The fifty-five-year-old Prime Minister succumbed to an aggravated liver ailment, accentuated by a lifetime of excessive drinking and unrestrained carnal pursuits.

Immediately after graduation from military college, superiors had posted the young officer to various infantry regiments in Bangkok and the provinces. Promoted to commanding officer of the Royal Bodyguards in 1946, he shied away from politics until the coup of 1947. A capable leader, who made quick and bold decisions, he assumed power from Pibun in 1959. In 1961, he stimulated formation of the six-year development plan to move the country forward. An avid anti-communist, largely funded and supported by the U.S., Sarit used measures of extreme prejudice against communist leaders who disseminated communist propaganda. Nowhere was this more prevalent than in Isan's Sakon Nakhon province. Indeed, when I first arrived in Thailand, I heard that the Prime Minister relished executing suspected commies in village squares as an example to those swayed by the leftist ideology. Ruthless to a fault, he even ordered the governor of Udorn, Suphat Wongwhathant, to execute a friend at Sala Den Din. As an example of those who lived by the

sword, the rampage of violence came full circle when Governor Suphat was "accidentally" killed during a domestic dispute earlier in the year.

Phoumi Nosavan journeyed to Bangkok with his family on 9 December to pay respects to his distant relative's people. However, a more likely reason was to assess relations with the new Thai government, and its current policy toward Laos. In addition, there was little doubt that he would lose some of the power and influence previously derived from family ties with Sarit. It was thought that there was danger he might move toward aggressive actions to protect his position. and attempt to force the U.S. into renewed support directly to him.

Sarit's deputy, Thanom Kittikachorn, was immediately elevated to Prime Minister. During the peaceful succession, Thanom stated that he would pursue the previous government's plan, although, at the time, no one in the Western camp knew what actual policy would ensue. Despite some doubt, in time it became evident that Thanom continued to implement the identical foreign and domestic policies of his predecessor. Retaining the same cabinet he inherited, Thanom sought to maintain political stability, promote economic development, especially in security sensitive areas, raise the standard of living, and safeguard Thailand from the communist threat at home and abroad.

Marking one departure from Sarit's policies, the government decided to shorten the country's transition from a military-dominated hierarchy to a popularly elected government. To this end, the Prime Minister advised the constitutional assembly to quickly complete a new constitution. His regime also relaxed stringent controls on the press.

Although leaders agreed to establish a more democratic political system (albeit Thai style), agreement on a timetable varied. Some believed an early resumption of political

activities would broaden the base of politics and strengthen popular identification with the government, the monarchy, and Buddhism. Others postulated that restoration of party politics, when the country was confronted with serious internal problems, might aid the communists in their efforts to infiltrate civic, labor, student, and political organizations. At any rate, martial law continued.

At first, glowing newspaper accolades flooded Bangkok regarding Sarit and his policies. However, following a respectful time, released from censorship by Sarit's death and Thanom's liberalization of public functions, the press and greedy politicians had a field day besmirching the former Prime Minister's reputation. I was surprised to read that Sarit was a man with many enemies. In testimony to the adage that 'absolute power corrupts absolutely, the dishonest individual acquired anything he wanted and the people generally hated him. He "owned" many Bangkok businesses. Possibly vying for a piece of the pie, government officials conducted an inquiry into his assets. The investigation revealed that he had misappropriated 600,000,000 baht in state funds. Money and jewels were discovered in the walls of houses provided to maintain minor wives. Similar to dividing an empire when a king passes, almost all the discovered and purloined funds were reputedly returned to the Thai treasury. At least that is what Bangkok papers reported. ³

³ Jim Coble Email, 03/08/02.
Thai Politics and Foreign Policy 1963-1971.
LBJ Library, Unger-State, 10/12/63.
Bangkok Newspapers.
Time Magazine.

After purchasing a fifteen-pound turkey, Howard invited Sang and me to his house to enjoy Christmas dinner. Deanie was an excellent cook and I looked forward to the occasion. However, as one of the group's few bachelors, I expected an upcountry assignment around the 25th.

Operations surprised me and I was on my way north on the 11th. The first leg on C-45 Beechcraft 7951C delivered me to Wattay Airport. Before catching a ride on Helio B-843, flown by lanky old-timer R.C. Smith, I met affable William J. Solin in the Operations Quonset Hut. Identified as an Operations Specialist, Solin was one of two individuals hired by the Company in December to establish a pilot information center (Flight Information Center or FIC) in Vientiane.

We had actually created a casual, unofficial FIC a long time before the Company version was formed. Whenever an aircraft received ground fire or battle damage upcountry, returning flight crews freely reported enemy dispositions and their movements to other pilots. However, this information was most often passed in the bar, which was not that well patronized, and was therefore just as easily forgotten. Operations Managers recorded what they could, and pilots marked their personal maps. When the Customer learned that Udorn personnel possessed good intelligence from PIREPs (pilot reports), pilots were encouraged to stop in Vientiane on the way back to Udorn to debrief their people and Air America Operations Managers. ¹

This hit or miss technique of disseminating combat information to interested personnel might have been acceptable

¹ CJ Abadie Email.

in the early days, but with an ever-escalating war developing, it was obvious that the method was no longer satisfactory.

Following the tragic September loss of the Air America C-46 near Tchepone, both Customer and Company officials readily acknowledged that vastly improved measures needed to be implemented to disseminate valid and reliable intelligence on unfriendly and extra hazardous areas to all Company pilots. Specifically, pertinent information must be especially crafted and displayed to keep crews from flying over known enemy AAA positions, and, should they be downed, to pass information to rescue units in a timely manner. After a great deal of conversation on the pros and cons on the subject, managers elected to sponsor a creditable pilot briefing facility.

Air Force and Air America representatives met to amend the 342 Contract to provide funding to hire up to three intelligence experts. When Solin, formerly a U.S. Army photo interpreter intelligence officer, and James L. Mullin, previously a U.S. Marine Corps combat intelligence officer, arrived in early December, the Vientiane Base Manager provided the best facility available in a Quonset hut, while a new Operations building was being built. As no recommendations were forthcoming regarding job descriptions, or an established standard operation procedure (SOP) available as a guide, other than being directed to develop a viable information system to prevent losing aircraft and crews, the men began the operation with nothing more than their previous experience and natural talent. The two Operations Specialists reported to the ATOG manager administratively, but were actually autonomous as they defined and developed their own jobs and responsibilities during an on-the-job (OJT) period.

Upon arrival, the men found that pilot briefings and debriefings were primarily conducted by Helio Courier pilot "Sandy" Sandoval. Captain Sandoval had incurred a serious head

injury during a recent crash. With a six-month mandatory grounding facing him, Vientiane management assigned "Sandy" the unenviable task of maintaining a Lao map depicting currently known enemy dispositions. Previously, a Customer sometimes provided briefings, but there was no standardization, and, citing a need to know, many important details were omitted.

The early days of creating a workable FIC proved frustrating and initially unsatisfactory for Solin and Mullen. Anticipating fixed wing pilot resistance to the new concept, the two young men scheduled an all-pilots meeting (APM) at the Air America Gray House directly across the street from the airport. During the evening, they outlined their perceived functions. They indicated that copious pilot and Customer input would initially be required to accurately plot hostile areas on their large situation map. Making the system work properly necessitated wholehearted pilot cooperation. This required morning pre-briefings and afternoon post flight debriefings crucial to currency and ultimate program success. Bill and Jim fielded questions afterward and left the meeting with positive vibrations about their impending task.

Like hungry ferrets, Solin and Mullin persisted in their quest to establish a functional FIC. As they became better known and trusted, different sources cooperated and provided them with tangible information. Operations Managers Tom Krohn and Larry Joseph realized the importance of the project and backed it from the beginning, as did fixed wing Chief Pilot Fred Walker and Helio Courier Chief Pilot Bill Andresevic. Charles Mann, USAID Director, and Ambassador Unger also supported the FIC concept. The Ambassador's attaché office, some Customers, and a USAF liaison officer, Captain Don Cherry, stationed in Udorn, also contributed valuable information. Fairly decent maps were obtained from French officers still in-country.

However, sort of like the Chinese admonition, "Don't break my rice bowl," many obstacles lay ahead, and not all Company managers or Customers were as enthusiastic or helpful. Uptight Station Manager Roy Stitt summoned Mullen early to his office and informed him that FIC was only a "paperwork panacea" calculated to pacify the restive pilot force. 342 Contract Customer representative, Frank Daly, still enjoyed briefing pilots himself and provided little information to the fledgling entity. Furthermore, Daly tended to discourage pilots from using FIC. Because Operations Managers possessed little briefing information for crews, many pilots initially cared little for the hassle of FIC, and generally turned to Daly for briefings. Within a few months, the Customer situation improved when Earl Jones replaced Daly. Over time Earl came to believe that only one briefing source was necessary: FIC. However, there were always problems involved with total Customer cooperation.

Eventually, with situation maps and with the most current information available in often fluid regions, and the system up and running more efficiently, pilots became increasingly confident in Solin and Mullin's ability to provide adequate briefings, and they began to cooperate in providing post flight intelligence. FIC improved and flourished. The men prepared a site book, and attempted to improve the signal system for airdrops and landings at upcountry sites. Unfortunately, it was some time before a FIC office was established in Udorn. Unless passing through Wattay Airport on the way to Military Region Two, those of us in Udorn still relied on "watering hole" pilot accounts, and on-site Customer briefings to obtain current intelligence on enemy movements and dispositions. The latter

method proved the best, and was employed during the entire war.²

² Tom Walker, FIC History, 10/12/64.
Leary 1964 Notes Provided to the Author.
Bill Leary 1964 Notes, UTD.
Joe Leeker, Air America in Laos: Humanitarian Work, 44-45.

I did not fly on my first day at Sam Tong, and discovered a few things changed. The place looked exceptionally clean, with decorations adorning some areas of the lower bowl. In past years the Meo people had been ignored and abused by lowlanders. Therefore, in an initial gesture to recognize their successful Military Region Two participation in the war, at Vang Pao's invitation, calculated by the warlord and his advisors to gain political points with his people, the Lao King visited Sam Tong for a day. The community interpreted this event as a beginning of a better future. The Meo operation sorely needed a boost, for many politicians, especially antagonist Touby Ly Fong and top generals in Vientiane, resented Vang Pao. This had become more prevalent after the Agency arranged to have Vang Pao promoted to brigadier general during a Long Tieng ceremony a few weeks earlier.

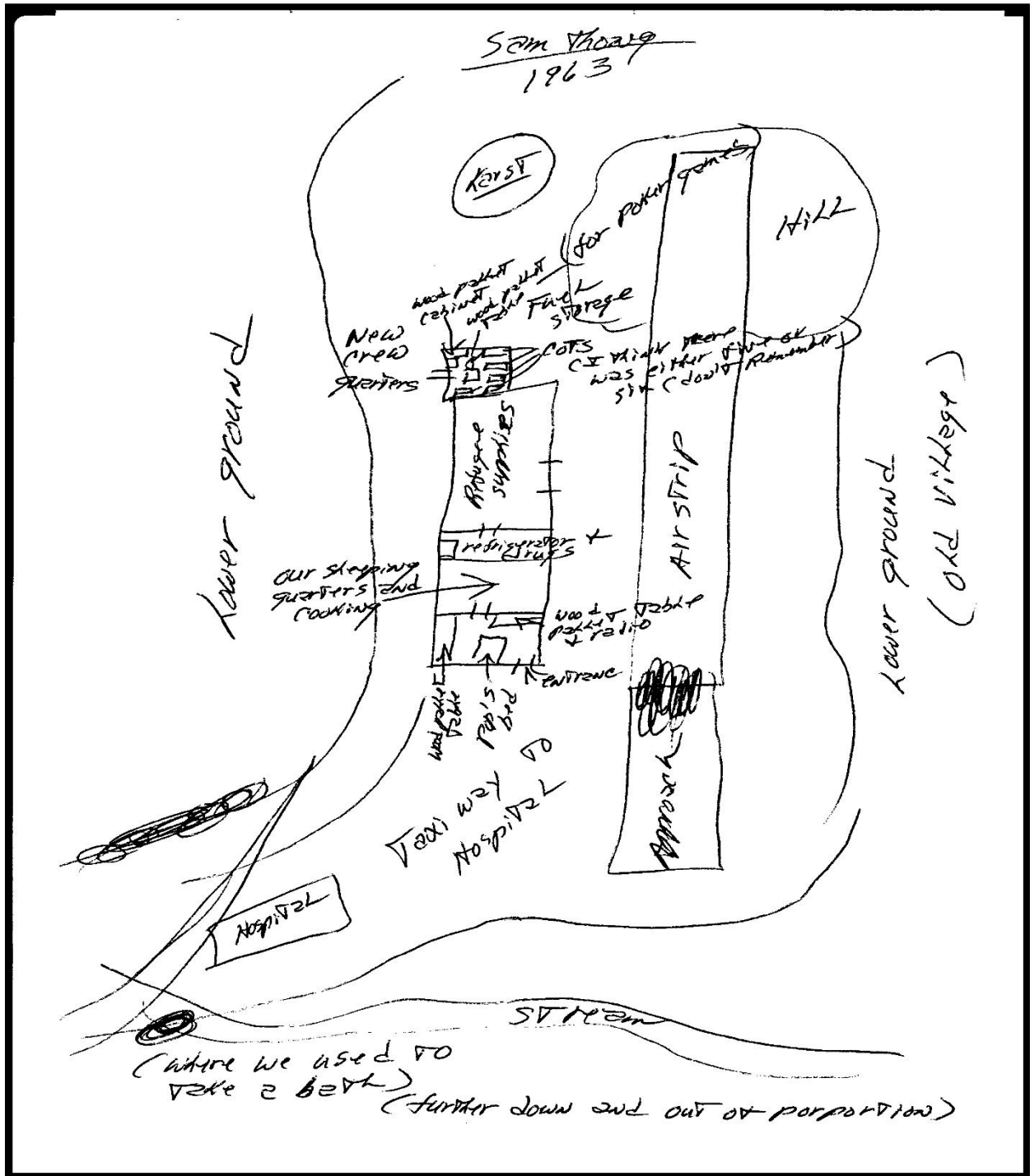
All the villagers and Vang Pao turned out, lining the runway for the Royal visit. Even though Vang Pao disliked him intensely, as a prerequisite to the visit, Neutralist leader Kong Le attended, and everyone either paid homage to, or shook hands with, the King. Chao Saykham, the governor of Xieng Khouang province, hosted lunch at the school built by the two IVS men. The only Americans attending these festivities were Pop and two officers from Long Tieng. ¹

¹ Blaine Jensen Letters, 04/29/96, 08/27/98.

NEW DIGS

A second change involved the presence of a separate crew quarters built next to the AID warehouse. One reason for the new building revolved around a continuing discussion about support for aircraft and Helio Courier pilots RONing at Sam Tong. The Customer, desiring to save money expended on daily Helio Courier roundtrip ferry flights, needed considerable work accomplished during a difficult time. Citing a requirement for the Helio Courier's daily maintenance, a lack of satisfactory accommodations, and Pop's apparent reluctance to welcome crewmembers' presence, Vientiane management had previously resisted RONs. Obviously, this was a weak argument, as helicopters, by definition, were maintenance monsters, and crews remained overnight at the site for some time. Actually, fixed wing pilot reluctance to RON at Sam Tong was an entirely selfish motive, and was related mostly to not missing nightly creature comforts and pleasures enjoyed in Vientiane. As former mud Marines and Army pogues, some H-34 pilots were not all that excited about remaining overnight at the site either, but accepted the responsibility to satisfy a requirement and retain their jobs.

Perhaps the main reason for the new building related to a theft of Pop's precious stock of medicine. After we had RON'd at the site for a time, there were a few second-hand innuendoes regarding minor thievery of USAID items (blankets) from the warehouse. Pop complained about his perceived losses and suspected light-fingered Filipino Flight Mechanics as the main culprits. Overall, the atmosphere was cool and unpleasant, and



IVS worker Blaine Jensen's rough, but fairly accurate rendering of the Sam Tong complex, including the new overnight crew quarters.

we operated under a black cloud of gloom. We were all very defensive.²

Then, on the morning he discovered substantial amounts of medicine missing, Pop went ballistic. Because he would not accept that anyone living at Sam Tong could have pilfered items slated for refugees, all of us crewmembers were suspect. During a bitter tirade, he immediately ordered rush, bamboo, and thatch materials flown in from other sites, allowing villagers to prepare woven bamboo walls to construct separate crew quarters. Everything but the wooden poles used for supports was imported. The task was accomplished within a week.

Blaine Jensen had an intense argument with Pop after he accused flight crews of stealing medicine. Responsible for the warehouse, Blaine countered that flight crews would never steal such items. Pop, taking a stubborn stance, angrily responded that no one in **his** valley was capable of doing such a thing.

The more Blaine deliberated about the incident, the more confusing it became. It was totally illogical that any crewmember would commit such a crime. Moreover, because Doc Weldon and Pop did not allow outside access to the medicine, it was "secured" inside a special area in the warehouse. The door leading to the medical supplies area was normally locked. Suspecting an inside job, Blaine decided to investigate the issue further.

A few days later, one of the Operation Brotherhood doctors assigned to Sam Tong by Weldon rotated to administrative capital for time off. Not wanting to cause an incident at Site-20, and following a gut feeling, Jensen called the Vientiane office and requested that people at the Wattay Airport examine the Filipino's luggage when he arrived. As suspected, airport

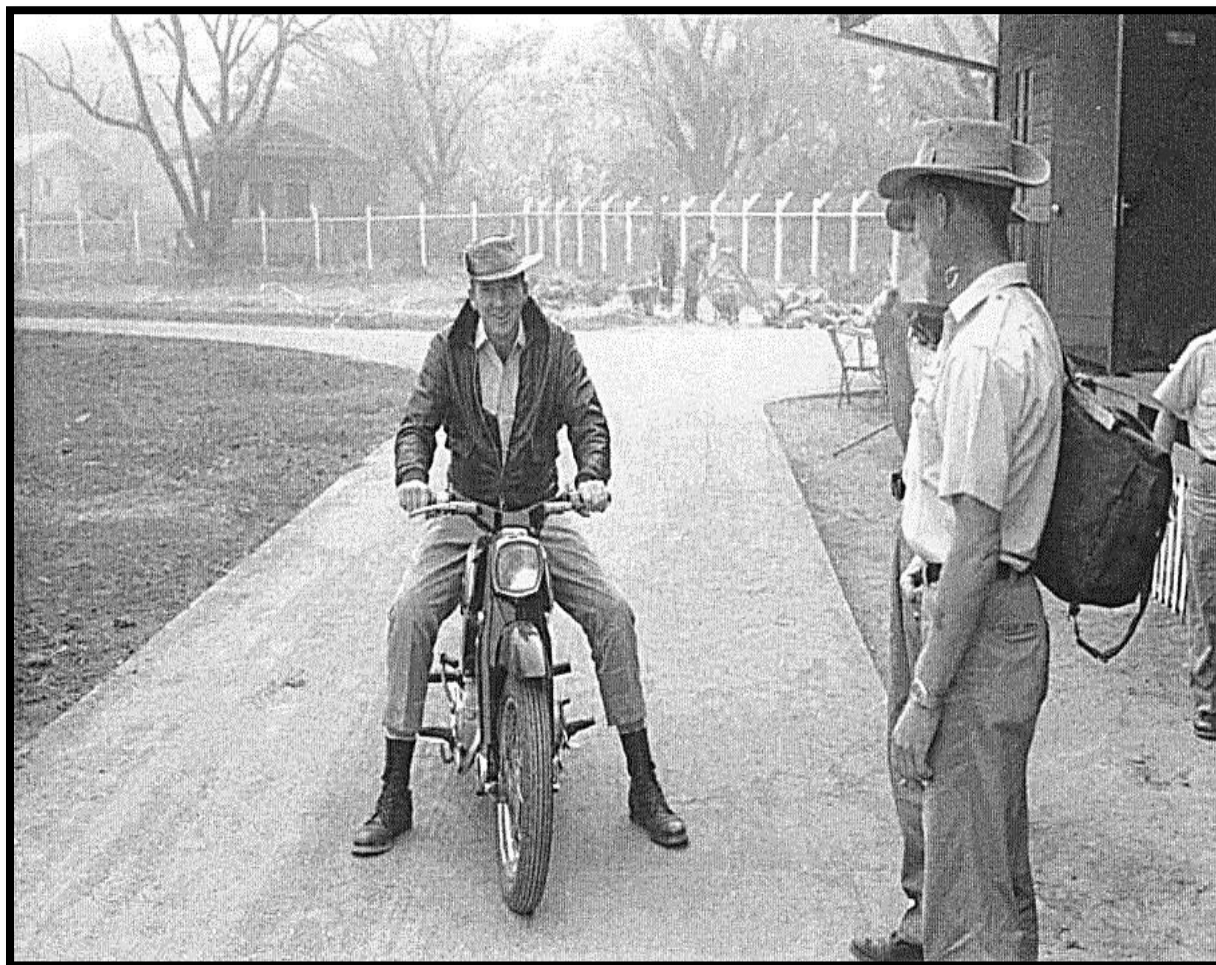
² Edgar "Pop" Buell was never a bright ray of sunshine, but when moody or angry, he was definitely a man to be avoided.

officials discovered all the stolen medicine neatly packed in his bags. Further investigation revealed that in his spare time, the doctor conducted a private medical clinic in town. To stock his clinic without incurring expense, he paid Pop's houseboys, who had free access to the warehouse, to pilfer substantial amounts of medicine. Pop summarily fired the houseboys, but, perhaps too stubborn or proud, he never apologized to us crewmembers.³

Actually, I found the new housing arrangement superior to the supply warehouse. Conforming to Pop's cardinal rule that we had to live at Sam Tong like the natives did, Western creature comforts were still non-existent, but the thatched addition was private, quiet, more spacious, and had single military canvas cots to accommodate three helicopter crews plus an occasional Helio Courier pilot. Like the original digs in the warehouse, one naked light bulb hung from a wire dangling from a center beam for use when the generator was in operation. The roof leaked a little and the dirt floor necessitated Yankee ingenuity to keep mud off the sleeping bag when removing one's boots. Rats were still in evidence, but not as well established. Perhaps because finding nothing to eat, or failing to discover the hut, I did not detect any rodents that first night.

I looked forward to flying Hotel-13 with Stan Wilson the next day. Despite Stan's reputation as one of the finest men within our mix of Flight Mechanics, I never felt as close to Stan as to other less exalted crewmembers. Because he appeared able to select his pilots, or perhaps still embarrassed about insulting his girlfriend at the Jute Box while still in the Crotch, I was never entirely certain.

³ Blaine Jensen Letters, #1, 02/13/96, 03/02/96.



Outstanding Flight Mechanic Stan Wilson straddling his motorcycle in front of the Air America Operation-Administration building. The Thai mailman stands with his pouch.

Nick Burke Collection, April 1963.

Early on the 12th, I was directed to Long Tieng, where Vint's Meo air operations assistant sent me east to Padong with ammunition. Heavy loads required high power climbs in order to cross the potentially dangerous gap on the Padong ridgeline. During the cool months, except for early morning fog in the river valleys, Military Region Two weather was clear in the mountains, but high winds pervaded the region fostering clear air turbulence and generating often severe and treacherous downdrafts. With such conditions, it did not pay to be complacent in the mountains, and there were colorful stories of unscheduled "landings" during this season. Indeed, a Dornier pilot told me that severe downdrafts had caused him to conduct a forced crash landing on a ridge east of the Tha Tam Bleung (Site-72) Valley. Therefore, maintaining vigilance for the slightest problem, if possible, I always attempted to cross the ridge with at least 500-foot vertical clearance.

Before landing at Site Five, I circled the area and noted a signal panel, but no people or animals were readily evident on the ground. Everything looked largely overgrown. In the past, the site must have provided excellent agricultural land, as evidenced by multi-terraced slopes one might see in China, stepped down toward the river valley. The team of soldiers I brought and those who appeared on the ground helped offload the hard rice, and I returned to Long Tieng for another shuttle.

After two roundtrips, a Caribou crew began hauling ammunition into the site. Soon after my first refueling session at Sam Tong, Vint arrived at Site-5 in a Helio to direct the operation. Always conscious of minimizing helicopter costs, he arranged fixed wing deliveries of fuel drums to reduce the time-consuming and unproductive shuttles between Sam Tong, Long Tieng, and Padong.



View of the Padong bowl and airstrip (Site-05) seen from the west. Low clouds obscure mountain tops and terrain to the east across the Nam Siam Valley.

Author Collection.

Vang Pao was determined to maintain pressure on the enemy along the eastern fringe of the Plain of Jars and the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley. To that end, in cooperation with FAN units, he established and maintained forward positions at Khang Kho (VS-204) and Phou Khe (VS-19) from which to observe activity, and occasionally harass and interdict enemy supply lines with mortar fire. So far, the Pathet Lao and dissident Neutralist troops held their ground. ⁴

PHOU KHE

The other redoubt was located eighteen miles northeast of Padong in defilade on the south side of a large mountainous area overlooking the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley. ⁵ It was here that Vang Pao's Meo and FAR troops had rallied following the previous month's failed Xieng Khouang Ville operation. Both sites were located at high elevations, but I later learned that Phou Khe, marking a benchmark elevation of 6,200-feet, handily dwarfed Khang Kho.

When Vint instructed me to commence shuttling 105mm ammunition to Phu Khe, to help calculate a realistic load, I asked the tall, bearded youngster (he allowed his facial hair to grow to appear somewhat older) for an approximate elevation and description of the site. He characteristically professed not to know and appeared unconcerned. Obviously, all facets of the round trips would be left to me to determine, and operations would be entirely dependent on my judgment.

My poor map did not indicate an accurate benchmark elevation, so, to minimize unpleasant surprises, I elected to

⁴ Located north across the river valley from Padong, Khang Kho was noteworthy as an early Meo resistance area and the location where Captain Abadie had crashed Hotel Delta in 1960.

⁵ Defilade: Fortifications or positions below the high point of a mountain that is not in the line of direct artillery fire.



A view of the southern approach to the strategic Phou Khe (LS-19) site overlooking the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley (LS-03) and Route-4. The early landing zone was later expanded to accommodate STOL aircraft. However, because of the drastic upslope and unpredictable winds, the Author never observed a plane landing there. Like many sites in the area, the site often changed hands.

Author's Collection.

carry a moderate load of 1,000-pounds during the initial trip. My caution was well founded, for when I first saw the pad, I nearly suffered cardiac arrest. The landing zone (LZ) was situated in a high saddle, at a "low" point in a hollow on the hill mass. What looked like an ultra-short strip of less than fifty feet ran up slope from the pad's lip north at a steep angle, where it disappeared into higher ground. I had never landed at such a high elevation, but using a flat power on approach and maximum caution, experienced little trouble landing. Once on the ground, it became obvious to me that no plane had, or ever would, land at this spot. At some time in recent history, someone had attempted to hack a short takeoff and landing (STOL) strip out of the mountain, and then abandoned the idea. Probably because of rocky terrain, extreme difficulty leveling the site, or motivational factors, workers had abandoned the job.

In addition, there were no Meo women at the site to perform the hard labor. From a helicopter pilot's perspective, one positive aspect of the landing zone was the fact that, masked from both visual and auditory perception, the pad lay in perfect defilade from enemy observers or direct artillery fire in the Xieng Khouang Valley. If carrying a heavy load off the site, another plus featured a sheer drop off from the pad's lip. This enabled one to dive off, rapidly accelerate through translational lift, and attain climb airspeed.

As I continued to shuttle ammunition into the site, and the aircraft fuel load diminished, I increased my load commensurately in stages to keep pace with Captain Bob Hitchman, my more experienced and highly motivated co-worker. At minimum fuel state, I eventually rolled and bounced off the grassy strip at Padong with about a 2,000-pound payload. By then, I had obtained sufficient experience and confidence in my ability to

"hack the program," and discovered that a no hover landing with a slight forward roll on the pad worked best at Phou Khe. The technique, learned and honed to perfection during hours of on-the-job-training (OJT), was well established, but never officially taught in the training command, the fleet, or designed for this high altitude. Other than Herb Baker, no one I knew in our organization ever consulted H-34 performance charts at the end of the pilot's flight manual. There was good reason, for if we relied on established Sikorsky parameters to perform mountain work, loads would necessarily be miniscule and the Customer's job never completed. However, it could be argued that a downside to carrying heavy loads would be readily apparent and manifested during a hard landing or crash after losing an engine. Of course, I knew something about such a problem from my troop lift incident in the Marines.

The heavily loaded roll-on technique was easy to use, but required close attention and pilot coordination. At the last moment, while decelerating in a nose high landing attitude, I employed a tail wheel touchdown. Then slowly rotated the nose forward and let the fuselage descend, while applying minimum power to cushion the main gear on the ground. If properly performed, the result was a short roll-on landing of less than five feet. Although such landings might have stressed the air-oil oleo struts and attaching points, the machine was exceptionally tough and, as long as one maintained a straight-line direction without yaw, the main landing gear took the punishment well. The method worked fine at the abbreviated strip, while countering unknown or marginal wind conditions.

On one return trip, I noted portions of two 105mm howitzers deposited beside the grassy Padong strip. Delivered by Caribou, the guns were disassembled and prepared for slinging. Hitch had



Looking at a northern approach to the Padong (LS-05) strip. The Meo base was nestled deep in the hills on the north side of an extension of the enormous Phu Bia range.

Author Collection.

already departed with one barrel and was en route to Phou Khe. With Wilson's assistance directing me over the load, Vint hooked up the other barrel. Late in the day, cooler temperature and diminished winds provided positive factors for a lift. Therefore, at the current fuel state, I had sufficient power to lift the load to a five-foot hover and depart without settling into the ground. However, the destination's higher 2,000-foot elevation did give me pause to reflect on the prospect of success, but I did have Hitch leading the way. He reported encountering no problem and I touched the load down in the automatic release mode. Even being lighter on fuel, the gun carriage was not easy to carry. Nevertheless, employing caution, pilot technique, and common sense, I safely delivered the heavier load. The artillery gunners were efficient, and before departing, I noted that one gun was nearly intact and ready to fire. That seemed impressive and I wondered who was assisting the relatively naive Meo with the assembly.

That night, exhausted after a long, tedious day, I enjoyed a toasty slumber in my repaired, but now rather garish looking sleeping bag.

I looked forward to another fruitful day shuttling supplies to Phou Khe, but, after completing the first fuel load, Vint ordered me to return to Long Tieng. It was Meo New Year, a time when Vang Pao mandated that his war cease for three days of celebrations. However, in consideration of the eastern operation, Vint struck a compromise measure with the general, and we were allowed to work a few hours each morning. The loss of half a day's pay was not appealing when attempting to accumulate maximum time during the sole monthly RON. However, no matter how much we complained, Vint countered that attending the social event was necessary and unavoidable.

Festivities were conducted outside in the eastern portion of the Site-20A valley. The Meo New Year was traditionally ushered in with an annual bath and a change into new clothes. However, with Pop and Tom Ward's guidance imparting Western influence, the people were now reputed to bathe more frequently. Lining the runway, ladies, wearing new black garb with gaily-colored sashes, and children appeared to enjoy themselves. In addition to their finery, the women and girls wore silver necklaces and ornaments of beaten French piasters. To see them so dressed at their games, one could hardly believe that a nasty conflict was in progress. With girls in one line and boys facing them, traditional cloth ball tossing occurred between genders while each exchanged verbal love poetry. Not wanting to violate taboo, perhaps incurring Vang Pao's wrath and becoming persona non grata, I did not participate in the tossing as I had done the previous year at Bouam Long. Naive at that time, I later discovered what I thought was simply an innocuous game, actually related to an ancient custom of mate seeking.

The annual bullfight occurred before lunch. There never was indiscriminate killing of precious livestock, and Vang Pao's bull invariably prevailed in the contest. When the two animals were pitted against each other, to the delight of the crowd, Vang Pao's larger and stronger bull intimidated the other one, which, outclassed, trotted off toward the west. Lunch was served for Americans, Vang Pao's officers, and Vientiane dignitaries in a long-thatched structure on the southeastern side of the runway. The fiery native drink, Lao Lao, and Johnny Walker Black Label scotch bottles flooded the table. Following ardent speeches and verbose toasts, displaying approval, custom dictated that one stand and chug a shot glass of booze. I was not a whiskey drinker, and Hitch rarely drank at all. Aware that I might have to fly more that day, certainly over the hill to Sam Tong, out of courtesy, I accepted the liquor, but touched very little. During the ceremonies, I discretely appealed to Vint for amnesty. In hushed terms, he agreed and indicated that he would see what could be done. Vint in turn talked to the leader who clearly understood the key words "might have to fly," granted us absolution, and we resorted to toasting the speaker with water. My regard for the bearded young man soared.

By this time, Vint, who conversed easily in French, was very close to Meo military and civilian leaders, and acted as Vang Pao's personal advisor. Establishing a great rapport of trust and respect, he took pains to understand important customs, feelings, and concerns of the hill people. He had a unique method of imparting a sense of caring, and that he desired to be as much a part of the hill tribes' lives as humanly possible for an American. Thus, he overcame a barrier that no previous American agent had ever managed to penetrate.

Indeed, most Americans were viewed, perhaps rightly so, as working merely for the U.S., a mind-set imbued by the Agency.¹

The following day was a repeat of the previous one: work early in the morning, then attend New Year festivities that curtailed additional flying. I made a mental note to absent myself from future Meo New Year's celebrations.

¹ Anonymous Peer.

That night at Sam Tong, Blaine Jensen came by the hut with an invitation for us to attend supper at the house of Nhia Ying, the well-respected Nai Ban. Paid by USAID, Ying also served as one of Pop's resident Nai Kongs. Relishing a break from a diet of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and bland canned goods, and the opportunity to observe how a Meo family unit, albeit an upscale type, actually lived, I readily accepted. I also considered that the invitation might be Pop's backdoor means of apologizing to us for his scathing accusation of Air America crews during the thievery incident.

THE MEO ABODE

The leader's house, an unpretentious thatched wall and roof building, sat on the same side of the Sam Tong bowl as the hospital and warehouse, but toward the eastern approach end of the runway. In contrast to a refugee environment, the traditional Meo house was very different from others hastily erected at Sam Tong. Primarily built with available and abundant natural resources, they were large, stout, and sturdy residences. Floors were dirt, with support beams consisting of solid tree trunks and smaller logs. Hand-hewn boards, fashioned by rough, sharp axes, generally formed the walls. In some cases, crude saws were employed, for Meo blacksmiths, a product of the Chinese culture, had learned the art of smelting iron and shaping useful tools long before the western world arrived to influence the area. Builders covered the roof with smaller boards, much the same as wood shake shingles. Strong vines culled from the area secured the shingles. In the absence of vines, thin bamboo strips were used. Regardless of the copious

annual rainfall the walls and roofs never leaked. Normally, a house had only one board door, leading into the main room, and windows were rare.

The traditional Meo house consisted of three sections. One entered a combination kitchen-communal sitting area. The women of the house employed a stone-ringed fire pit for cooking and warmth. A wooden tray hung over the pit to smoke and dry excess meat, salted fish, or vegetables. Since there was little ventilation and the fire burned constantly, the houses were always filled with irritating smoke. Before the introduction of AID cooking pots, rice was soaked and steamed in a hollowed-out log with bamboo mesh at the bottom. Vegetables were cooked in a similar manner. Salted meat and fish were skewered on thin pieces of bamboo and roasted over coals near the fire's edge. Westerners considered boar especially delicious when cooked this way. A crude board cabinet and shelf along the wall provided a workspace and place for water gourds. Artisans also made water buckets from wood slats, which they secured with rattan and leak-proofed with resin. The wooden Meo stool was low, and held together with pegs. The kitchen and family area also contained all the equipment required to manufacture plant fiber cloth. Various plants, berries, and roots provided necessary dyes.

Sleeping quarters formed the house's second portion. Generally, one long bed rested along the wall. Depending on what was available in the area, beds were made of logs, boards, or woven bamboo. They were raised four feet off the floor to provide circulation and safety from potential attacks by rodents and snakes.

The third section was accessed from both the sleeping room and the outside. The rear contained stored rice and corn. Some older villages maintained separate granaries off the ground to keep vermin out of rice and corn stocks. This was a common

practice of ethnic Lao and Lao Theung, but was unusual for the Meo. The remaining portion of the utility room was used to corral animals at night, for safety and against the bitter cold. This included a menagerie of chickens, ducks, hogs, horses, and a Meo version of a Brahman bull.

A rice mill lay outside the house. Common to Southeast Asia, it consisted of a hollowed log, a long pole with a smaller piece inserted at the top, a cross piece to provide vertical movement, and a leveled area at the base. One placed her foot on the base--women did most all of this work--raised the log, and let it drop into the rice container. This pounding method removed bran from the rice grains. Rice was then winnowed on woven bamboo trays and the bran fed to the hogs, ducks, and chickens. Corn was ground in a similar manner. Some of the resulting product was eaten, but the majority used to manufacture corn whiskey.

In a well-organized village, water ran through a system of bamboo piping from mountain springs, some as far as three miles from the village. During construction, bamboo was split in half lengthwise and the nodes removed. Then, to keep the water clean, the pipes were suspended at eye level off the ground.

Leather products were manufactured from cattle hides, but leather was not tanned in the normal way. The product was salted and dried to prevent spoiling. Then, as needed, strips were sliced off the hide, soaked in water, and used for bindings or other similar purposes. The pieces constricted and became very tight when dried. The leather was very tough and not pliable, but served to make halters for the animals and in fashioning tools.

In a matter of minutes, we entered the Nai Ban's house, where other dignitaries were already seated. An elongated split bamboo table with hard benches occupied the room's center. As it

was still a holiday, the ladies brought in a feast of duck, chicken, rice, green vegetables, and soup from an adjoining room. Compared to a supper of Beanie Weenies, I enjoyed every morsel. When offered Lao Lao to drink, I deferred to a can of warm Japanese beer. I expected to use chopsticks for utensils, but the table was set with porcelain coated plates and cheap metal knives and forks. When I expressed surprise, Pop informed me that the Meo were civilized when it came to eating, and everything was very clean.

Normally men ate before the women and children, who impatiently waited to dine on whatever was left over. However, because this was a celebration time, speech making took precedence that night.

POP MAKES AN ASS OF HIMSELF

Pop had a few shots of the fiery lao-lao with dinner, and was definitely in his cups when he began belligerently grumbling about Filipinos and people stealing his goodies from the warehouse. The racial baiting was confusing to me, and had an obvious effect on our crewmembers. When I looked around the dimly lighted table later, my crew chief, C. Decosta, and another man had discretely slipped out of the house. Then Pop rose unsteadily to say a few words. Using his faithful assistant Thongsar to translate, he expounded on our dual friendship and a special relationship with the Meo people. After the excellent meal and a couple of warm Kirin brews, I was beginning to feel mellow and became respectfully absorbed in the man's banter. Bombastic to a fault, the self-appointed father of the Meo droned on in half Lao, half English to those still left at the table. Then he removed a dollar bill from his pocket and, perhaps attempting to make a point regarding money not being meaningful compared to friendship, he burned it to a crisp. The

act shocked me. I had never seen anyone do this in all my life and, like burning the flag, believed it disloyal and even perhaps against the law. Now I was embarrassed, for the crass act and his senseless demeanor portrayed a dark side of Pop that I never observed before, and hoped I never would again. Despite losing my respect for him that night, I guess he made his point, for a deathly silence pervaded the room. Almost to a man, we rose to depart, as the ladies, children, and dogs impatiently moved into our places.

In retrospect, three items had coalesced to bother Pop that night, which had culminated in his actions: the medicine had been pilfered; Filipino doctors were complaining that they were not being properly compensated to live and work under primitive and dangerous conditions; and a few pilots had complained to Vientiane and Udorn about Sam Tong's harsh living conditions.

Various individuals interpreted Pop's lesson differently. The complicated individual intended to impress his audience of "foreigners" that Americans were there to help people, not to earn a lot of money. His overlying motivation was to move his agendas toward completion, and in turn make himself look good. This had little to do with friendship. The evening really confused the Meo present, and they asked questions about it for weeks afterward. The answer was always the same. Pop was a good man and his actions related solely to the whiskey talking that night. The explanation was accepted.

Nhia Ying, who was part Meo, part Lao Theung, later died as a result of injuries incurred in a Helio Courier crash close to Tha Tham Bleung (LS-72). Following the crash, the PIC exited and began running from the plane. Then he realized that Nhia Ying was still sitting in the right seat, without an exit door on that side of the cockpit. While he was extracting Ying, the plane caught fire and exploded. Only through the efforts of the

PIC, who burned his hands and face badly, was Nhia Ying pulled to safety.

Not as lucky as the Helio Courier pilot, Nhia Ying suffered third degree burns to over eighty-nine percent of his body. Miraculously, he was still alive upon reaching the Sam Tong hospital. The Americans arranged to send him to the hospital at Korat for treatment. As he needed more expert treatment, Jiggs' wife, Doctor Pat McCreedy, was attempting to obtain permission to fly him to Brook Burn Hospital in Texas on the Red Ball Express. However, before the move could be arranged, Nhia Ying succumbed to kidney failure. ¹

¹ Blaine Jensen Letters, 05/04/96, 06/25/97.
Arthur Dommen Interview of Ernie Kuhn, 36, 03/25/95.

By the 15th, New Year's celebrations were winding down. The war resumed and we were allowed to work non-stop between Long Tieng and Padong without a cultural or any other restriction. When we resumed shuttling bullets to landing zone Phou Khe, the two big guns positioned to the right side of the pad were preparing to pump out rounds toward Xieng Khouang Ville. This slowed our operation slightly, necessitating circling until ascertaining that fire missions were not underway.

THE LONG TOM

Deep into my second fuel load, Vint instructed me to fly along with Bob Hitchman to the Ban Lat Houang (LS-09) area, located near Route-4 on the eastern edge of the Plain of Jars, to retrieve and then deliver another artillery piece to Phou Khe. I certainly had never landed on the Plain before, and did not know if Bob had. Hitch preceded me to Padong by twenty minutes, so perhaps he possessed additional information on the proposed mission and area situation. In exhibiting his "leadership" qualities, Hitchman characteristically always appeared to know what he was doing, and rarely shared his thoughts with peers. Therefore, as the junior man, I elected to defer to his seniority and follow him. It had been quite a while since Hitch had fallen off the motorbike and suffered the concussion. Some in the outfit believed that he was not the same person as before, but I had not really noticed any great difference in his flying ability or authoritative attitude. As long as one let him believe he was in charge, he was fine to work with.



A small portion of the high plateau Plain des Jars, a region of rolling hills located in central Military Region Two. An interlocking series of dirt roads, trails, and foot paths allowed free movement through the historically strategic area in the dry season. Control of the Plain allowed the enemy potential access to the river towns of Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Paksane.

Author Collection.

Confident and aggressive as usual, Bob departed northward. With the Alston episode still fresh in my mind, I followed his helicopter at a respectful distance and altitude over Khang Kho and between mountains until reaching the fringe of the PDJ. Then, after dropping down and hugging the southeastern Plain's perimeter for safety, we soared over rolling hills, swathed in sun parched, straw colored grass, to complete the remainder of the twenty-mile flight.

A small gathering of troops dressed in green uniforms waited in a flat, open area around an enormous dismantled gun. Hitch touched down without incident. While I landed, he was already in the process of hooking up the sandy-colored gun carriage and trail portions of a Soviet 85mm howitzer we called the "Long Tom." Up to then, I had only seen pictures of the artillery piece while studying Soviet weapons at Officer's Basic School and I knew it had a range of at least 15,000 meters, over nine miles.

I should have realized from previous experience, and was not happy when Hitch seized the easier job without even consulting me. He must have been a hell of a Marine officer. He left me, a relatively green guy, to wrestle with the problem of loading a long barrel, in the middle of nowhere, without a clue as to the enemy situation. Displaying distinctive Lao features, the troops were definitely not Meo, and were probably the distrusted Neutralists. ¹

¹ I later learned that I had actually landed near the Lat Houang (LS-09) crossroads area of Route-4, a little west of Xieng Khouang Ville Valley's mouth. IVS agricultural workers had evacuated the area during late December 1960. I did not land there again until the summer of 1969.



The Xieng Khouang Ville Valley looking westerly toward the Plain of Jars and the Lat Houang (LS-09) area. A portion of Route-4 is visible as a white ribbon on the right side of the valley.

Author Collection.

Despite serious reservations, I decided to make the best of the dilemma. Therefore, even though uncomfortable in a strange area and with troops who could easily have been turncoats, to better evaluate and supervise the job, I shut down (one had to have faith). After "C" retrieved all the cargo tie-downs from the cabin, it was obvious that there were not enough straps to accommodate the long rifle barrel for a sling load. With this option off the table, the next best idea was to load the barrel into the helicopter without causing damage to the interior--but how? *Was there enough room in the ship and how would we accomplish the task?* The barrel's sheer size and thickness indicated a very heavy piece of steel--actually 2,200 pounds. Following consultation with the trooper in charge, he mustered all available hands. I estimated that more than twenty 150-pound men, after several rest stops, grunting and cursing carried the monster to the helicopter. With much cajoling, the fatigued men then deposited the breech portion onto the plywood decking, and carefully slid the piece part way into the electronics compartment. This left the tube's business end protruding between the fuselage and right strut. In order to minimize damage to the air/oleo strut, "C" padded what he could with red wipe-off rags and secured the tube to the cabin floor tie downs.

The effort had required at least an hour's effort, and I was eager to depart, for it appeared that the small force was preparing to withdraw to the west. With access to favorable winds, I easily accomplished a takeoff from the Plain's 3,400-foot base floor. While slowly climbing to altitude, I speculated about the weapon's ownership and previous disposition. *Was the piece owned by the Neuts or FAR? Was the weapon recently obtained during the push into the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley and now remanded to VP's forces to preclude capture?* The lack of pertinent information was, and continued to be, part of my

problem when attempting to assess situations and formulate decisions to accomplish a mission.

Particularly security-minded during this period, the Customer generally maintained a closed mouth approach with us pilots, providing few, if any, tactical details. Vint, in a surprising revelation, later confided that Agency policy did not visualize us contract people being retained more than three years. Over that time period, they calculated that flight crews would learn too much about the overall operational picture. Notwithstanding this explanation, all I required were sufficient facts in order to make suitable decisions to ensure my ship and crew's safety.

As suspected, the heavy load rode firmly in the belly, and I was flying slow enough to negate excessive drag that might be created by the barrel's external portion protruding from the cabin. While climbing to altitude, I was pleased about managing the loading of the special item. It appeared that I was gaining experience in making my own decisions, and was fast becoming an old timer.

As the situation presented an unknown quantity, and perhaps might result in a hard landing, I set up a longer, slightly steeper approach angle than normal to allow for an unanticipated burble or adverse downdrafts. Once fully committed to landing, there was virtually no viable go-around available at the site, and one had to rely on God-given senses and pilot technique for success. By then, I had learned that a slow power on approach provided me the best method to predict power requirements and maintain positive aircraft control while landing on marginal pads. In some cases, if lucky, it might also allow an abort during that crucial split second before losing translational lift, whereby one could abruptly turn ninety degrees away from a hill, dive, and accelerate to climb airspeed. The real criteria

for success involved judging all variables before landing. One of the most important factors involved wind direction and velocity. However, in these hills, winds frequently were difficult, if not impossible, to assess. Lacking a windsock, smoke, blowing grass, or other indications, although not the best technique, one often relied on the last known winds. A downwind condition could often be determined objectively by comparing indicated airspeed against actual groundspeed, but this was not always reliable in sloping terrain, which constantly changed a pilot's depth perception. The final analysis of wind direction and velocity generally originated by relying on each other for information, but someone always had to be the first to land.

Feeling my way into the mountain gap, maintaining 2800 RPM and a slight amount of ground speed to reduce the power requirement, I jockeyed Hotel-13 to the ground. As expected, the landing was a little hard but the air-oil oleo struts provided an adequate cushion, and the resulting landing worked out perfectly. Basking in self-esteem, I returned to Sam Tong knowing I had just performed a difficult task that I judged few had ever accomplished.

Apparently, there was a push to remove additional Soviet equipment and weaponry from the Plain of Jars, but not at the cost of negative political ramifications and ongoing communist propaganda attacks against Air America. On the 18th, Unger cabled Washington regarding removal of an 85mm gun Kong Le wanted the U.S. to have. However, no Air America marked plane had overtly entered the Plain of Jars area since the November C-123 downing. This was in contrast to the innocuous, "humanitarian" Bird and Son landings and airdrop operations (particularly the triple-tailed Pioneer flown by Eldon Walker and others) since the area came under Neutralist-FAR control.

The only plane available to load the big weapon at the time was a C-123. In haste to obtain the gun, the U.S. Ambassador indicated that the job could be accomplished at dusk when the area was generally deserted and receiving regular cargo shipments.

High level wrangling over the removal method continued in Vientiane for another week. Then, finally considering the political risks too great, and in an effort not to rile the Soviet representatives, State refused to authorize the use of an Air America plane to remove the gun. As an alternative, State recommended that several RLAF planes fly camouflaged and crated pieces of cannon out of Moung Phanh. Unger did not concur with State's idea to use RLAF planes, for he wanted as little Lao knowledge about the move as possible. He also had doubts about Air America crews safely landing at Moung Phanh (L-106).²

The following day I again worked at Padong and was relieved at Long Tieng after flying one fuel load. I was fortunate, for I soon caught a ride on a Bird and Son plane to Vientiane and then Udorn. Before leaving, I talked to Tony, recently back from recuperation after leaving the Bangkok hospital. When I proudly mentioned the guns and what I had accomplished, he indicated that Vang Pao was going to stir up some sierra with the three guns by harassing the Ville and other enemy areas. Since I carried little ammunition for the 85mm gun, I was curious about additional shells. Lacking the zipped-lipped approach of Vint, he informed me that artillery rounds for the gun came from the Kadena Air Force Base, Okinawa, where the military and CIA maintained enormous stocks of Soviet weaponry captured during the Korean War. That information offered me a

² LBJ Library, Vientiane-State-VTE Messages, 18, 12/27/63.

great deal of satisfaction. Working intimately in a hands-on situation, I was slowly gaining the Customer's confidence, learning some secrets, and considerably more regarding the operation. However, all that I had accomplished during the previous five days, while performing tasks related directly to the war effort, would only be known to a few of my peers. For, after departing upcountry sites and crossing the Mekong, on penalty of termination, we were cautioned not to reveal what transpired during RONS. Supposedly, all events were left behind as if they had never happened.

POLITICAL MACHINATIONS

Charges and countercharges of military violations continued to cloud the Lao political scene. The Geneva Accords mechanism--to include protocols and ICC inspection teams--proved unable to control the Lao ground situation, as it provided no well-defined cease-fire line, and several hundred miles of unpatrolled borders. In addition, the Polish ICC representative and other leftist officials continuously thwarted free movement and inspection rights to troubled sectors throughout the country.

A close liaison was maintained on the Lao issue between Britain and Russia by repeated trips of their ambassadors to the Pathet Lao and dissent Neutralist headquarters at Khang Khay, and by Ambassador Harriman's visit to Premier Khrushchev. The representatives indicated Soviet willingness and cooperation in preserving the Lao status quo. However, the Pathet Lao, the North Vietnamese, and the Chinese continued to maintain their hard line. Souvanna Phouma suggested that the Russians were ambivalent about further Lao entanglement and a desire to support Hanoi leaders. In a flag-waving effort, to boost the morale of his constituents and western allies, Souvanna professed that he was committed to continue striving for a

unified and neutral Laos. He also considered the Pathet Lao movement merely a screen for China and Vietnamese troops, who required sanctuary in the eastern Lao border for a base and conduit to supply Viet Cong operations within South Vietnam. ³

On the 20th, during a temporary truce arranged by Kong Le and Singkapo, representatives from the coalition government, including the Princes, met on the Plain of Jars. Citing weather problems and other adverse conditions for not conducting earlier meetings, they discussed the right-wing police harassment of Pathet Lao officials in Vientiane and the small security detachment there. Like a broken record heard so many times before, the parties agreed to principles of neutralization for Luang Prabang and measures that might possibly lead to the same for Vientiane. They departed with plans to meet in the future at Phong Savan or Khang Khay. At month's end, Kong Le and Singkapo again met on the Plain of Jars. ⁴

UNSCHEDULED RON AT PHOU KHE

After working JUSMAG missions in and around Bangkok for a month, Mike Marshall, leaving his wife and baby Neal in Udorn, went upcountry the day after Christmas. During a three-day RON, he shuttled ammunition into Phou Khe, where thirsty howitzers intermittently belched their deadly fire.

On the 27th, Mike struggled through low clouds constantly forming and blowing over the site. Late in the day, while preparing to depart for Sam Tong, Mike talked to Ed Reid on the Fox Mike radio frequency and discovered that Ed was inbound with Vang Pao and would stay the night. When Mike indicated that he

³ Arthur Dommen, 255.
CHECO.

⁴ Vientiane to State Message Traffic, 01/02/64.

was about to jump off the lip of the pad, as he had throughout the day, and return to Long Tieng, Vang Pao wanted both helicopters to RON should the need arise to evacuate critical personnel.

When established in the tent, as Mike's overnight gear and the company sleeping bag were at Sam Tong, Reid lent him an extra jacket to partially ward off the severe cold so common at that time of the year.

Artillery and assorted gunfire continued throughout the night. To help keep warm, they walked to several machine gun positions to observe tracer fire. Most weapons were .30 caliber types, but one was a longer-range Soviet 12.7mm gun, equivalent to our .50 caliber, which stabbed an authoritative finger far into the Xieng Khouang Valley. After hitting the ground, green and red rounds bounced for fifty to one hundred yards. The dark valley revealed no tangible results, so Mike believed the gunners merely shot for harassment purposes and to impress the general, who was nowhere in sight.

Tiring of the pyrotechnic display, Mike and the others repaired to an assigned parachute tepee where a small fire burned almost long enough for them to fall asleep. Marshall recalls his night in the weeds as the longest, coldest, and most miserable night of his life. ⁵

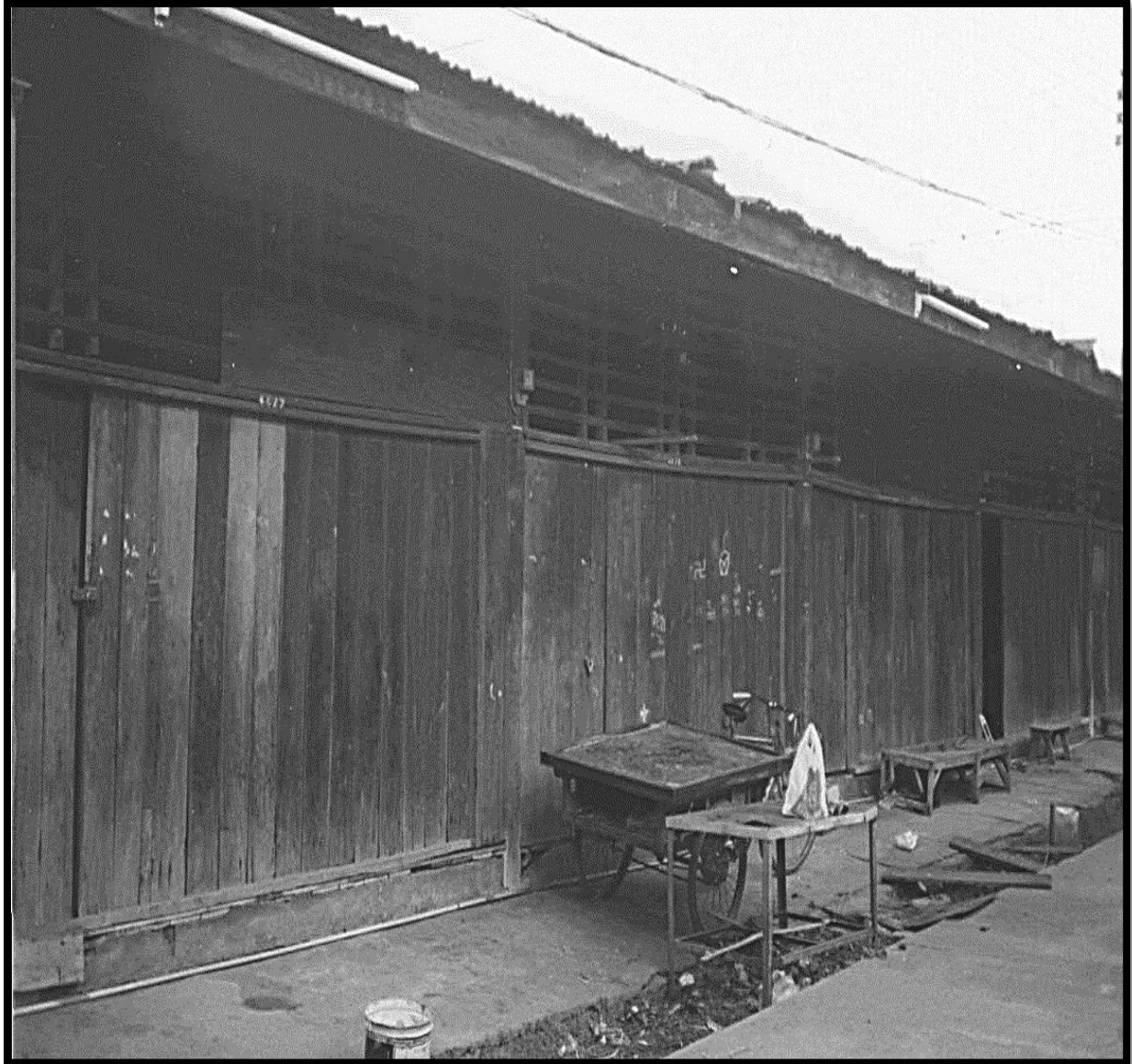
Before departing Phou Khe in the morning to resume shuttling ammo, he retrieved expended 85mm shell casings, and later crafted one into an ashtray. ⁶

⁵ The night must have been truly dreadful, worse than the very cold and wretched night Mike and I had spent the previous December in Pop's Sam Tong warehouse with inadequate protection from the cold.

⁶ Mike Marshall Emails, 08/04/99, 08/05/99.

While volunteer pilot carpenters earnestly labored to complete the new Club bar, Dick Elder asked me to take charge of the pool excavation. Although abrupt and domineering at times, Dick had a persuasive way of approaching a subject and convinced me that I could make a positive contribution to the ambitious project. The Seabees had already stripped concrete from the tennis court, and some of the topsoil in the area between the Club and Operation-Administration buildings. Pool dimensions were staked and lines strung to determine the dig. As there was no earthmoving equipment or funds available, I was to supervise two local Thai employees who would hand dig the hole.

Since my bike operated fairly well, I arrived at the compound early and remained late on my days off the schedule. For my efforts, Elder authorized the Club to provide my meals. My workers, Boon and Vechai, did the best they could under difficult circumstances, and, like I had with young enlisted men in my Marine squadron, I soon became fond of them. It was difficult work, and during the heat of the day, they tired easily. I had to constantly watch them or they would fall asleep on their shovels, especially the younger Veech, a handsome fellow, who I suspected conducted an extensive extracurricular nocturnal love life. Boon, the older man--who knows how old he actually was?--and his family rented a single space in a four-room complex down Soi Wat Po not far past my house toward the local wat. To stimulate them by setting the example, I tried digging myself, but soon gave up, as my back was still an unknown quantity ever since being squashed by an opposing monster while attempting a left end run during a high school football game.



A series of relatively inexpensive single-room rental housing units similar to what Boon and his family lived in down the street from me on Soi Wat Po.

Author Collection.

Ben Moore frequently wandered by the pool project to observe and encourage progress. It was the most I had ever talked with the retired Navy Captain, and I learned that he was going to Taipei soon to solicit money for the shoestring operation. He hoped our current efforts would display to his superiors the creditability of our intentions. We targeted project completion for March, but that depended largely on financing for materials.

Before too long, it became apparent that the job would be far more difficult and complicated than first envisioned, for nestled under the topsoil lay a full yard of fused, semi-porous laterite material. Laterite was not quite as tough as solid rock, but it was the same low-grade iron ore utilized in the northeast to top roads and our parking-taxiway area. Spades barely dented the substance, therefore pickaxes and brute manpower were the only solution to make any headway in the hole, and the originally slow work proceeded even slower. To make matters worse, making the work sloppy, the water table lay directly below the laterite.

NKP

Without facility completion, Nakhon Phanom's PSP runway officially opened and was dedicated on 1 June. High level dignitaries attending the ceremonies included General Harkings, Commanding Officer MACV; Captain Bartlett, Chief of Staff Construction Battalions Pacific Fleet; and Thanom Kittikachorn, then Marshall Sarit's Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister. Following formalities, Seabees fed all hands thick, juicy steaks. ¹

¹ Richard Tregaskis, *Building the Bases*.

Because of the monsoon season and additional required tasks, work on the base continued for six more months. By December, the Seabee unit had generally completed the earth moving phase, installed culverts for the pierced steel planking runway, and erected necessary support buildings at the Royal Thai Air Force base--read American base--located a few miles from Nakhon Phanom town. Close to the Mekong, NKP, as it became known, was positioned a few miles from habitation and prying eyes. I had previously taken an engineer to the area for recon and site selection. During succeeding years, NKP became a highly classified and critical support base for strike aircraft, SAR missions, electronic intelligence gathering, and Trail interdiction.

Dick Elder learned from his friend Jim Amalong that the unit was preparing to leave the area, and as they were abandoning surplus items, he arranged for Hitchman and me to fly Hotel-15 there to see what could be salvaged for our pool construction. In addition to performing transmission break-in procedures, to further present a semblance of a training mission and allay Customer accountants' curiosity, Bob scrounged a plastic instrument hood, and we performed straight and level simulated instrument flight to and from the site. The detachment was indeed deploying to another area, and the commanding officer furnished us with numerous pipes and barrels of tar to either use for the pool or barter for other difficult-to-obtain items.

That represented my last flight in 1963. After increasing substantially since we reentered Laos in the spring, December flight time ended on a down note. It marked our second lowest month since the 466 hours flown in February.

XMAS

Close to the holiday, spirits were high and a round of Christmas parties occurred in the American community. As we were earning more money than in the previous year, this holiday was more prosperous and many home interiors took on the appearance of a stateside Christmas. People discovered the merits of the Sears and "Monkey" Ward mail order business. Consequently, paper and synthetic Christmas trees replaced poor attempts the previous year to cobble together scraggly pines obtained from the southern Plain of Jars. Even the Club was well decorated.

As planned, Sang and I enjoyed a delicious Christmas dinner across town at the Estes house. Patti and Scotty were great fun to watch, and received more presents than one could imagine.

Scotty, like many little shavers, rebelled against brushing his teeth. To reinforce his mom and dad, every time I saw the little fellow, I reminded him, "*Brush your teeth, Scotty!*"

After dinner, we were in the living room leisurely enjoying coffee when the kids let out a bellow from beneath the raised house where they enjoyed playing. As they screamed, "*Snake. Snake,*" we went into action. In what Deanie later recalled as one of the funniest moments of her life, Howard grabbed a large machete and I a DDT spray gun. Then we stumbled down the stairs to do battle with the intruder. Instead of a snake, the object was identified as a common eel. At least the incident helped to work off some of excess calories we had packed in that day.

Treating myself to a late Christmas present, I purchased a Zenith 3000 model transoceanic radio at the STARCOM Post Exchange. The efficient radio, in addition to beaming the Voice of America (VOA) and British Broadcasting (BBC), gave me access to other English broadcast stations in Australia, the Philippines, and several communist countries. It allowed me to feel less isolated and slightly more informed about current

events in my constricted sphere than just reading questionable newspaper commentary. One downside was that the majority of stations beamed their propaganda late at night.

FAIRY DISPLAYS HER TRUE COLORS

Attempting to be civil, Mom sent Fairy a Christmas card. I wished she had not, for Fairy sent it to Deanie, who in turn showed it to me. I gloomily wondered if Fairy still held a misconception that we eventually might get back together, or had conceived some other nefarious master plan. The gesture turned out as a prelude to an unpleasant New Year's Eve encounter.

Although I was scheduled to test and ferry a CIC helicopter to Vientiane on the first, Sang and I went to the Club's New Year's Eve party. As it was quite cold, she wore her ugly, rough brown jacket that looked like a hand-me-down from a Chinese fire sale. However, beneath the abomination, she wore a well-tailored red dress, one that pleasantly accentuated her youthful, curvaceous figure, and placed other less well-endowed females to shame. In addition, her attire complemented her dark skin, but a bright wide smile was her especially captivating feature. Set within a pretty face, the combination formed a lovely sight for any normal male with proper orientation. Even stodgy old Ben Moore, whose hormones were still raging, was beside himself with sexual fantasy, fawning over and looking like he wanted to consume her. Although she might have been flattered, the Captain's actions did not particularly concern me, for our relationship constituted only a temporary arrangement. With no firm commitment, she was free to come and go as she pleased.

Just as I anticipated spending an enjoyable evening with friends, events turned sour. Like a Halloween witch perched menacingly on a broomstick, I observed Fairy at a table with Deanie. Back in town for some unexplained reason, during

Howard's absence upcountry, she had artfully conned Deanie into inviting her to the party. To preserve a holiday atmosphere, we exchanged brief, false pleasantries, and I attempted to make light of the embarrassing situation, but in actuality, I was quite upset. A couple of soft drinks and dances softened my black mood and dispelled some of my anxiety.

Later in the evening, Fairy approached me and solicited a dance. Sang was noncommittal, but wary of her intentions, I cautiously approached the obligation. Exactly as I had envisioned, the devilish woman had hustled her way into the party with the intent of causing trouble. This was revealed when she boldly requested return of the blue star sapphire ring she had given me a few months previously when we were still a hot item. Believing the request crass, unwarranted, and out of place, I refused. In my culture, one did not gift someone and then request the item back. Perhaps under other more agreeable circumstances, I would have returned the ring, but I was disgusted that she blatantly took the opportunity to embarrass me in front of my friends. That terminated the dance, and any more contact with the woman. Sang could not believe what had transpired, and vehemently spat *phi bah*, the Thai equivalent of crazy.

However, Fairy was not finished venting her venom. In retaliation for my noncompliance to return the ring, Fairy informed Deanie of some items better left unsaid pertaining to Howard's purported activities before his wife's arrival in Udorn. To lend some validity to her revelations and sour my relationship with the family, she indicated that I had told her. Of course, regardless of the wacky source or reliability of the message, Deanie conducted a rigid line-item cross-examination when Howard returned from upcountry. Despite his protestations of innocence, he ultimately paid the piper. He subsequently lit

into me, but calmed down after I declared ignorance about having or divulging such information to the deranged woman. For my part, I considered the disastrous evening an extremely poor way to end the year. It did serve some purpose in that no one paid much attention to her after the episode, and we all severed ties with her.

THE FROG EATS THE MOON

On 30 December, a lunar eclipse occurred in Southeast Asia. The event was greeted in Laos by great expenditures of small arms ammunition delivered by both superstitious and celebratory individuals. Emanating from Kha legends and even rooted in American Indian animistic beliefs, as the eclipse proceeded, the participants sought to dislodge the giant frog consuming the moon. Like their ancestors, they too were successful. The frog spit out the moon; it returned to its original shape and the world was once again saved from the celestial monster. However, one could only imagine what this event would portend in the New Year for the unfortunate populace and Lao combatants. ²

² The original title for the Author's collection of books was envisioned to be *The Night the Frog Ate the Moon*, however, ensuing events precluded using this title.

The waning year found combatants strengthening positions in strategic areas. The Pathet Lao retained control over areas adjoining North Vietnam and China. Overall, Pathet Lao battle strength depended on North Vietnamese support, including Vietnamese forces in Laos. In isolated northwest areas, communist control appeared to be increasing. Neutralist FAN military forces under Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma retained positions on the Plain of Jars and other scattered areas. General Phoumi Nosavan's FAR retained control of population centers along the Mekong River.

Uncontested, enemy supply routes leading from North Vietnam into Laos remained open. Some supplies moved from China along roads and trails into border areas of northern Laos to Pathet Lao units isolated from border areas of North Vietnam. The late year buildup stemmed from the ability of communist forces to move in considerable strength against government troops. Speculation presupposed that the enemy would maintain their operations below a level that might provoke Western intervention.

During the year, the most significant military development since formation of Souvanna Phouma's government was improved cooperation between Rightist and Neutralist forces. The shift occurred when April attacks on Plain of Jars Neutralist positions forced a beleaguered Kong Le to seek FAR support. Since that time, the FAN, originally equipped with Soviet bloc arms, was refitted with U.S. weapons.

Analysts expected the Pathet Lao, through their Viet Minh stiffeners, to gradually attempt to increase territory under their control. In addition, strong clearing actions were

expected against Meo, Yao, and Kha tribals challenging Pathet Lao control over large areas in North and East Laos. ¹ ©

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02/16/20, 05/10/21, 07/03/21, 03/17/22, 07/23/22.

¹ Military Assessment Vientiane Embassy to State, 01/04/64.

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As the New Year approached, we wondered what was in store for us in the future. Tensions were escalating in Military Region Two that could soon reach the breaking point and result in a more intense war. This would have implications of danger for those of us who often flew in the contested areas of Laos.

We had lost one president and had a new one. So far it seemed that President Johnson would continue to support Souvanna Phouma, the U.S Embassy in Vientiane, and the Lao army. Time would tell.

Many of the principals mentioned in this book have succumbed to the ravages of time. Those no longer with us from the crewmember and management ranks are: Nick Burke, Dan Gardner, Bob Hitchman, Scratch Kanach, Mike Marshall, Tom Moher, Ben Moore, Bill Pearson, Ed Reid, Charlie Weitz, and Stash Wyatt.

Deceased Customers include: Pat Landry, Bill Lair, Mike LaDue, Vichit Mingrachata, Tony Poe, Mac Thompson, and Bill Young. Meo General Vang Pao died in California.

Aviation writer, teacher, and friend Professor Bill Leary passed in 2005. I shall forever be indebted to Bill for his sage advice and early notes on the Air America era that stimulated me to continue writing.

I have lost touch with many people over the years, so there may be others gone.

Clarence Abadie lived north of the Author in Tickfaw, Louisiana, where he nurtured injured hawks, and built an auto gyro and a single seat gas-turbine helicopter. Selling his house and toys, he now lives on a houseboat in another state.

Wayne Knight immigrated to Australia with his family and continued flying in a management position for a helicopter

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company in Singapore. After this, he tended his fruit farm. He is totally retired today. We conducted a daily Email exchange for about a year, covering the entire Lao war.

Following a stint with the U.S. Customs Department, Jim Coble settled in North Carolina. Not satisfied with the humid climate, he relocated to the cooler hills of Mexico. After his wife passed, Jim moved back to North Carolina.

Leaving Air America in 1965, Howard Estes rejoined the U.S. Army. He and his family retired to Charleston, South Carolina.

Terry Burke continued with the Agency, then joined the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency, where his last billet was as the Assistant Director. He formed an investigation company, and wrote a book about his experiences as a Case Officer in Laos.

I interviewed Pisidhi Indradat in Bangkok. The incarceration by the Pathet Lao had taken a toll on his body and he had liver damage. After writing his story of survival, he passed in Bangkok.

I have lost touch with Dan Alston since our interview in Mobile, Alabama.

Dick Elder, remained involved in aviation for many years, lives in Florida.

Following his Air America experience, Bill Cook worked for the Federal Aviation Agency (FAA) and is likely retired.

Joe Flipse lives and farms south of Nashville, Tennessee.

Jim Spillis spent decades in Miami, Florida. For several Years, he and his wife visited her relatives in New Orleans during the Mardi Gras celebrations, and we had many enjoyable hours together. In addition to providing me with interviews, Jim provided me with photographs that appear in this book.

Those who also lent or gave me invaluable photos were: CJ Abadie, Nick Burke, Jim Coble, Joe Flipse, Wayne Knight, Mike LaDue, Mike Marshall, Pisidhi Indradat, and Mac Thompson.

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Former IVS and USAID worker Blaine Jensen remained with the State Department until retirement. Blaine lives as a gentleman farmer in Pingree, Idaho. His detailed letters in response to my probing questions provided me with a Customer's perspective about the Lao War. Enhancing narrative, he also helped me flesh out cockpit observations with actual ground accounts.

Pat Whitacre, wife of my Kappa Sigma brother Bob Whitacre at Duke University in the fifties, has taken an interest in my efforts to explain and narrate the Second Indochina War in Laos. An accomplished author of three books, she has spent countless hours editing and recommending grammar and content changes. She believes my works have considerable merit, and she is quite interested in their publication. Having been kept in the dark of actual events in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War Era, she believes that these works, describing first person experiences of men in the air and on the ground, as influenced by the decisions and policies of the "powers that be" in distant Washington, finally provide an accurate account of this misunderstood period in our history. Their publication will help everyone, especially those whose loved ones perished, or returned to America with battle fatigue, to appreciate the dedication of Air America crews in supporting and rescuing our brave warriors.

Lastly, my son Peter has been very helpful in this protracted endeavor. In order to ease my writing burden with sub-par tools, he assembled my first computer, and encouraged its use. He periodically maintains and upgrades the equipment. In addition to frequent technical advice, Peter has copied and filed many photographs for inclusion in the books.

My wife has often provided information about Thailand and the nuances of language from time to time. She has been patient

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over the many years I have been writing, and only occasionally comments on the "never-ending" book.

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Wyatt, CP.
Young, Bill.
Zeitler, Bill.

GLOSSARY

AAA	Anti-Aircraft Artillery.
AAM	Air America.
AB-1	CIA office in Udorn.
ADC	Tribal village home guard.
AIRA	Air Force Advisor attached to the U.S Embassy.
Animist	Native belief in spirits in inanimate objects.
APM	All Pilots Meeting.
ARMA	Army Advisor attached to the U.S Embassy.
Asian Acres	Housing compound for Americans in Udorn.
ATOG	Air Transportation Operations Group.
ATR	Airline Transport Rating.
Baht	Thai currency.
BBC	Overseas British Broadcasting Station.
BHS	Ban Houei Sai.
BLT	Battalion Landing Team.
BU	Volunteer Battalion.
B-26	WW-2 twin engine bomber used in Laos.
B-24	World War Two bomber.
CAS	Controlled American Source-CIA.
CINCPAC	Commander in Chief Pacific Command.
CNAC	China National Aviation Corporation.
CONUS	Continental United States.
CPH	Chief Pilot Helicopters.
C-Rats	World War Two military canned food rations.
C-123	Twin engine STOL cargo plane.
C-46	Twin engine cargo plane.
C-47	Twin engine cargo plane.
C-130	Larger cargo plane.
C-7 Caribou	Twin engine STOL airplane.
CYA	Slang for cover you're a--.
De Facto	In effect.
DDT	Insecticide used to kill mosquitos.
DOD	Department of Defense.
DZ	Drop zone for cargo aircraft.
Farang	Thai name for foreigner.
FAN	French term for the Lao neutralist military army.
F/M	Flight Mechanic.
FAR	French term for the Lao military right wing army.
F-86	Single engine jet fighter plane.
F-100	Air Force jet fighter plane.
F-101	Air Force jet fighter-bomber plane.
FIC	AAM Flight Information Center for briefing pilots.
General Direction	Guide assigned at Long Tieng to show the way to an unfamiliar site.
Golden Worm	CAT Convair 880 jet aircraft.

GLOSSARY

Hard Rice	Ammunition and explosives.
Helio Courier	Small single engine STOL aircraft.
HF	High frequency radio.
H-34	Military single engine, 4 bladed helicopter used by AAM for operations in Laos. Marine term-HUS-1
H-34G	Coast Guard version of the H-34.
Home Plate	Home base-Udorn.
Hotel	Prefix for H-34 identification.
HRS	Marine version of the Sikorsky S55.
ICS	Intercommunication system.
IFR	Instrument Flight Rules.
IVS	International Voluntary Services.
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff.
JFK	President John Fitzgerald Kennedy.
KHA	Generic name for lowland tribal groups.
KIA	Killed in action.
Lao Site (LS)	Prefix for numbers used to identify the numerous landing sites in Laos; originally Victor Sites-VS.
KL	Neutralist leader Kong Le.
LOC	Military term for Line of Communication.
LP	Luang Prabang.
Long Tom	Soviet Bloc 85mm field artillery gun
LZ	Landing Zone.
MAAG	Military Assistance Advisory Group.
MAP	Military Assistance Program.
Magnet Ass	Pilot who incurred frequent battle damage.
Medevac	Evacuation of the sick or wounded.
Meo	Name used for majority mountain tribal groups.
MIA	Missing in Action.
MR	Military Region-five in Laos.
Monkey Ward	Montgomery Ward.
MPC	Script or form of military monetary exchange used overseas.
Nai Ban	Meo village chief.
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization.
NCO	Noncommissioned officer.
NHLS	Neo Lao Hak Sat-communist political wing in Laos.
NKP	Nakhon Phanom.
NIE	National Intelligence Estimate.
NSC	National Security Council.
NVA	North Vietnamese Army.
NVN	North Vietnam.
Operation Brotherhood (OB)	Filipino medical units in Laos sponsored by the Manila Chamber of Commerce and the CIA.
PACAF	Pacific Air Force.
PARU	Thai Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit.

GLOSSARY

PHI	Spirit or spirits
PIC	Pilot in Command.
Plug	Vang Pao's guard who had been mauled in the face by a bear.
POW	Prisoner of War.
PSP	Pierced steel planking-interlocking units for an airstrip.
PX	Post Exchange.
Quonset Hut	WW-2 type metal building for storage or billeting.
Ritaville Ridge	A check point and dividing line between the VTE flood plain and mountains of north central Laos.
RLAF	Royal Lao Air Force.
RPM	Revolutions per minute.
RTB	Return to base.
Samlor	A three-wheeled pedicab used in Thailand.
SAR	Search and Rescue.
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization.
SGU	Meo special guerrilla unit.
Sierra —	Used for radio calls and logbook entries to identify Thai sites; later changed to Tango.
SKY	Term natives used for CIA.
SOG	Study and Observations Group for cross border ops.
SOT	Special operations teams.
SR-71	Twin engine high altitude spy plane.
STOL	Short takeoff and landing plane.
TBA	To be announced.
Ten Two	Twin engine modified C-45 passenger aircraft with tricycle landing gear.
T-6	Conventional landing gear single engine training plane modified to carry machine guns and rockets.
T-28	More powerful trainer with tricycle landing gear converted to carry bombs, rockets and machine guns.
Transitional Lift	10-15 knots the point where helicopter lift increases or diminishes on takeoff or landing.
U-2	Single engine high altitude glider type plane used to spy on communist countries.
UFO	Unidentified Flying Object.
USG	United States Government.
USMC	United States Marine Corps.
VHF	Very high frequency radio.
VOA	Voice of America overseas broadcasting station.
Volpar	Modified Ten Two passenger plane with improved engines and tricycle landing gear.
VP	Vang Pao, leader of the Meo resistance in MR-2.
VTE	Vientiane.

GLOSSARY

WAI A respectful form of Thai greeting or departure
 with hands clasped together.

Watering Hole. A bar or drinking establishment.

Zerk A special fitting on a helicopter designed for
 lubrication of a moving part.

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