

**RICE, REFUGEES,
AND ROOFTOPS
AIR AMERICA, INC
BOOK FIVE
1964
YEAR OF THE
DRAGON
BUDDHIST ERA
2507**

Harry Richard Casterlin

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PROLOGUE

The 1964 Air America helicopter program in Udorn commenced with nearly nineteen line pilots on the rolls, still well in excess of the actual crew requirement for the few airworthy UH-34Ds contained in the Air America (AAM) inventory. As events festered in Laos and people departed on leave or to pursue other worldly interests outside of paramilitary aviation, the number of pilots available at any given time dwindled to less than half that number.

The year marked a substantial expansion of hostilities, and commencement of limited U.S.-Thai-Lao airpower in Laos. By early spring, substantial escalation, fostered by the introduction of additional North Vietnamese troops into the country, skewed the tenuous balance of power between adversaries. To bolster Lao army morale and respond to enemy offensives in Military Region Two (MR-2), the United States Government (USG) sanctioned the use of increased "Lao" T-28 airpower and its unique weaponry to help equalize a deteriorating military situation. To implement the switch in policy, military leaders dispatched U.S. Air Commando Detachment-6 to Udorn, Thailand, to train Thai, Lao, and selected American pilots in counter insurgency combat flying.

During the year, there was little change in the political factionalism that continued to plague the remote country. Souvanna Phouma continued to offer an olive branch to Pathet Lao representatives by attempting to entice them to return to Vientiane and resume an active role in the tripartite coalition government. However, beset by past rightist bias, political murders, and general

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unpleasantness, the resident enemy refused to leave their sanctuaries at Khang Khay and Sam Neua.

The political situation came to an abrupt head when a rightist coup attempt in the spring exacerbated the shaky kingdom's woes almost to the breaking point, creating additional instability within the Vientiane government. Quick to take advantage of the subsequent chaos, the communists, after capturing several FAR and Meo sites and creating thousands of additional refugees, made further gains, forcing Commander of the Lao Neutralist military forces, Kong Le's FAN, and the FAR troops completely off the Plain of Jars by mid-May. After Souvanna Phouma's request for assistance, and with intentions of initially stabilizing the conflict, United States sponsored air activity began in earnest.

Responding to a pressing requirement for current and accurate intelligence regarding enemy positions and movements, clandestine U.S. military involvement substantially increased with the reintroduction of in-country air reconnaissance missions in the Plain of Jars area of Military Region Two and along the eastern border in central and southern Laos, which encompassed the logistical Ho Chi Minh Trail complex leading into South Vietnam. Dubbed Yankee Team, what began in May as a temporary mission was extended indefinitely. In addition to gathering ground intelligence for Royal Lao Army forces and battle damage assessment (BDA) for the Royal Lao Air Force (RLAF), the program intended to assess enemy infiltration along Lao border trails into South Vietnam, to encourage USG allies, and to demonstrate American resolve to stand firm by agreements and hold the line against communism in Southeast Asia. Since enemy lines of communication (LOC) were studied

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with enemy anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) guns, the inevitable occurred mid-year when two U.S. Navy jets were downed in the Plain of Jars area.

Most likely, because of the publicity and sensitivity of air mission discovery conducted in a supposedly neutral country, no viable military search and rescue (SAR) helicopter capability was in place at the commencement of the reconnaissance intelligence phase. Therefore, largely by default, Air America civilian H-34 and fixed wing pilots, generally familiar with the area and available to assist, were pressed into service. Largely untrained in modern rescue techniques, and unarmed but under pressure to participate, we civilians sandwiched the challenging and extremely hazardous SAR tasks between "routine" missions, which also began assuming increasingly hazardous proportions as the war escalated. Thus commenced the first of a "new normal"--more challenging requirements that drastically modified our job descriptions, and that only continued to increase challenges over the years. As the year progressed, largely based on political vagaries prevailing at the time, air support and need for our unique services waxed and waned.

During the rainy season, aided by Lao/Thai T-28 strikes, Air America airlift, and U.S. military air reconnaissance activity, a substantial RLA military victory occurred. Combined FAR, FAN, and Meo guerrilla forces, supported by artillery and air, commenced a limited, but ambitious offensive to clear and retake portions of Routes-7, 13, and the strategic junction at Sala Phou Khoun. The operation and other friendly offensives met with unexpected and remarkable success. By year-end, such operations

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resulted in restoration of vast amounts of previously lost government territory.

By mid-1964, the military balance of power and the Lao situation appeared considerably more stable. However, with the communists achieving noticeable gains in coup-plagued South Vietnam, U.S. officials sought ways to counter enemy infiltration through the eastern Lao Panhandle. While General Ma's RLAF T-28 pilots selectively pounded enemy logistic routes east of Savannakhet, much time was wasted on debate and approval to use U.S. planes to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail system. Consequently, additional aircraft were lost to enemy gunners. Finally, in mid-December limited Barrel Roll strikes commenced against the myriad of logistic trails in the upper eastern Panhandle region.

As hostilities intensified in both Laos and South Vietnam, and appeared to impact, even threaten Thailand, joint Thai-U.S. measures were achieved to strengthen Thai defense capability and internal security. Major air bases were improved and expanded throughout the country to support additional assets envisioned necessary for strategic pursuits. In exchange for approval to implement this initiative, Thailand received substantial economic and military aid.

The increased military activity in Laos, and Air America's demonstrated success in SAR work, fostered a welcome increase in respect for helicopter crews and their machines. Following so much uncertainty and doubt as to the helicopter program's longevity, for the first time since the Author arrived in Udorn, it appeared that our jobs

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might finally be secure--at least as far as one could possibly expect. ¹

HRC

¹ Project *CHECO*, *Beginning of Air Operations in Laos*, Internet, 07/07/02.

For those who have not read the Author's previous books regarding Air America helicopter operations during the Second Indochina War in Laos, a brief account follows, tracking Washington movers' perception of the Royal Lao Army force structure.

To maintain the status quo and a façade of adherence to protocols of the 1962 Geneva Accords, the United States Government (USG), through its agencies and military services, engaged in both overt and covert support to regular and paramilitary Lao forces. With the approval and at the request of Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, under a provision in the 1962 Accords, military assistance was overtly provided to non-communist forces. These troops included the Forces Armee du Royaume, or RLA (later called FAR), led by General Phoumi Nosavan and the Neutralist faction, Forces Armee du Neutraliste (Neutralist or FAN) under General Kong Le, the buttress for Souvanna Phouma's regime.

Never sanctioned under the Accords, but deemed necessary to counter the enemy in the hinterlands, USG provided support to paramilitary guerrilla and intelligence-gathering units. Meo tribals, the main paramilitary force of any consequence in the country, received substantial covert support through CIA channels.

Auto Defense du Choc (ADC) units and the Directorate of National Coordination (DNC) were smaller Lao paramilitary organizations employed during the war. ¹

¹ Auto Defense du Choc: Guerrilla element of the Royal Lao Army established in 1958, composed primarily of Meo tribesmen.
Directorate of National Coordination: A police organization controlled by Siho Lamphoutacoul, which ran the National Police from 1961 until 1965.

Considered part of the FAR structure, and therefore controlled by General Phoumi, ADC units possessed a strength calculated at 9,000. They were comprised of home guard military units concerned with village or urban defense. Neutralist ADC units were also in the process of being developed to perform identical functions.

The DNC, charged with implementing security and police responsibilities, was outlined in the FAR table of organization. Led by Colonel Siho, but controlled by General Phoumi, the 7,800 men, including three paratroop battalions, acting as a combined military intelligence service, engaged in intelligence, customs, psychological warfare, border control activities, and special operations. Although also located in other urban river cities, a majority of DNC personnel remained in the Vientiane area to ensure Phoumi's political power.

With USG approval, efforts of the U.S. Ambassador's Lao Country Team, Agency point man Bill Lair, along with Thai Police Aerial Reinforcement Units (PARU), conceived and implemented a brilliant, covert Meo paramilitary program in 1960 tailored to slow and contain communist advances in Military Region Two (MR-2).²

Two prominent Meo leaders, civilian politician Touby Lyfong, and FAR military officer Vang Pao, served as principals in the Meo movement. Because of Vang Pao's affiliation with the Lao military, Meo forces were officially considered a part of the FAR ADC structure, but were actually supported and advised by Agency personnel.³ Highly successful, from inception to 1964, the program had expanded to approximately 19,000 guerrillas, who

² For a more complete history of this unique program, please refer to Book 1-*Genesis: The Air America, Inc. Helicopter Program-Laos 1959-May 1962*.

³ Vang Pao: Vang was the surname; Pao the given name.

functioned in village defense and engaged in harassment activities against the communist supply lines. During development, employment, and support of the tribal paramilitary program, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) provided World War Two weapons, ammunition, salaries, and subsistence support to the guerrillas and their families through Air America airlift capabilities.

The Meo, as did other Lao tribal groups, settled by choice in remote areas away from the mainstream Lao and urban centers of government. Although constituting a potential problem to Lao nation building, tribal integration into Lao society and identification with the Lao nation was not encouraged or pervasive in Lao leaders' short-term vision. Instead, the elite preferred the traditional custom of tribals living separate and apart from the Lao.

In addition to the large and growing Meo program, Central Intelligence Agency Case Officers developed minor paramilitary and intelligence assets among 1,700 Yao in northwestern Military Region One (MR-1), 400 Kha in southern Military Region Four (MR-4), and 1,200 Lao Theung in Military Region Three's (MR-3) central area.

CIA support of the Lao fighting man was implemented and achieved by covert and Royal Lao Government-sanctioned air supply planes and helicopters of Air America and civilian operator Bird and Son. Operations continued unabated under the expanding umbrella of USAID contractual agreements and through the CIA's cover, flexibility, and extraordinary funding

mechanisms.⁴

⁴ Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1969 Volume 28 Laos: Memorandum from the Deputy Director for Coordination, Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Scott) to the Special Group, (Washington, 01/17/64). 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) 98.

With the war progressing poorly within the Southeast Asian Theater for Western interests, and political wrangling in South Vietnam continuing to be in chaos, by January, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, a holdover from the Kennedy administration, elected to commence high altitude U-2 reconnaissance flights over North and South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Before January ended, the marked political instability since Prime Minister Diem's murder had resulted in yet another military coup in Saigon. ¹

During April 1961, a special USAF unconventional air warfare unit was ordered formed by Air Force Chief of Staff General Curtis Lemay at Hurlburt Field, Mary Ester, Florida. Dubbed Air Commandos, the unprecedented element would be capable of both counterinsurgency training and combat operations. The force would be tailored to be "self-contained, one that could deploy anywhere and conduct operations."

Air Commandos were deployed to South Vietnam in 1961 to train pilots to operate the AT-28 plane, and conduct clandestine operations. As a direct result of the assignment, they participated in the first American combat missions of the future war.

On 6 December 1963, Pacific Air Force (PACAF) leaders, after due consideration, proposed deployment of a United States Air Force Special Air Warfare unit (SAW; also known as the Air Commandos) to Thailand. Their mission was personalized to

¹ Seven military coups and changes of the South Vietnamese government occurred during 1964.

include training, and to develop Lao and Thai pilots' proficiency in T-28 combat techniques to counter the surging forces of evil in Laos. With concurrence of both Lao and Thai U.S. Ambassadors and the respective governments, State and Defense Departments agreed on a plan to dispatch these Air Commandos to Udorn, Thailand. Then, early in March, with the Lao situation unwinding, the Joint Chiefs of Staff ordered the USAF to direct the SAW unit to Udorn for an initial temporary duty (TDY) period of six months. Reflecting the unit's good work, personnel tours were extended in September.

Earlier, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) at the Pentagon, responding to Secretary McNamara's efforts for greater pressure on North Vietnamese leaders to abandon their ambitions in the South, submitted selected lucrative North Vietnamese targets for bombing consideration. Strikes would be followed by air and amphibious attacks of the North, and incursions into Laos and Cambodia. Leaks of the plan were encouraged, so Hanoi leaders might respond by curtailing their efforts in the South. Super hawk General Curtis Lemay, hoping to stimulate a tangible military reaction from the Johnson Administration, sarcastically emphasized that there had been two years of unsuccessful efforts to compel northern leaders to end subversion in South Vietnam. However, favoring a political resolution to the conflict, Administration officials were reluctant to escalate an air war.

In Laos, as in South Vietnam, the enemy responded to political instability with increased military attacks that forced FAN and FAR units off the Plain of Jars during April and May. To counter and contain the enemy advance, Souvanna Phouma requested and received U.S. aid. Royal Lao Air Force T-28 strikes began in earnest. To boost success, the less experienced Lao and Thai pilots were covertly supplemented by a handful of selected volunteer Air America civilian aviators, who received

refresher training by Det-6 Water Pump instructor pilots. Results were fair, and were perceived as helping to thwart further enemy movement toward Vientiane. The value of the "A-Team" and their English-speaking capability was realized when SAR missions for American pilots commenced in early June.

The substantial North Vietnamese Army incursion into Military Region Two to stiffen Pathet Lao fighters, prompted U.S. military leaders to request added and more precise intelligence information in and around the Plain of Jars.² Therefore, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) directed headquarters Commander-in-Chief Pacific (CINCPAC) to utilize U.S. Air Force and U.S. Navy assets for medium and low-level reconnaissance missions in the area. The operation would be called Yankee Team. In addition to intelligence gathering for CIA agents and Lao forces, photos could determine the extent of communist infiltration into South Vietnam through Laos. Armed with this information, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma could divulge any extraterritorial Geneva Accords violations to the world for political gains. For the RLA, the friendly air providing support to Laos was believed to be a positive morale factor.

Because of United States Government (USG) constraints, approved targets had to loop through many government channels, which greatly slowed response time. In spite of this delay, Moung Soui's (L-108) defense was bolstered by air support. Furthermore, the innovative rainy season offensive, named Operation Triangle, achieved overall success largely because of coordinated air strikes and Air America-supplied air logistics.

² Pathet Lao (PL): Translated as the Land of Lao the Pathet Lao organization was the military arm of the political Neo Lao Hak Set (Lao Patriotic Front), a pro-communist political organization, allied with North Vietnamese. The Pathet Lao was also called the Lao People's Liberation Army.

By mid-year, planning trended toward the inevitable: expanded use of U.S. air power.

The Tonkin Gulf incident perpetrated on 4 August by communist gunboats was all USG required to commence military escalation and change the complexion of the Second Indochina War. Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, new Commander-in-Chief Pacific, requested first time punitive air strikes against North Vietnamese territory. The following day, sixty-four sorties of A-1 Skyraider, A-4 Skyhawk, and F-4 Phantom aircraft sallied forth from USS *Ticonderoga* and *Constellation* carriers against Vinh oil storage tanks, and torpedo ship base targets at Quang Khe. Two U.S. Navy jets were shot down by enemy anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) fire during the action. One pilot was captured and was incarcerated for the remainder of the war. Despite requests for additional strikes, the Johnson Administration continued to advocate negotiation and failed to order follow-up strikes. However, a buildup of combat aircraft on both sides began.

Reflecting a consensus of majority of military leaders, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) recommended immediate action against the communist war machine in the North. In case of Chinese intervention, CINCPAC's counter thrust plan had already been approved by the JCS.

Seeking to reduce infiltration of men and materiel through Laos into South Vietnam, President Johnson approved a portion of the Joint Chiefs of Staff plan. U.S.-Lao discussions pertaining to limited air and ground action by South Vietnamese forces, supplemented by RLAF T-28 pilots (et al), and U.S. armed reconnaissance flights continued. However, despite all these discussions, President Johnson realized that the most important factor at the time related to strengthening political stability in the Saigon government.

Toward the end of September, battle plans were forwarded to the field, calculated to reduce enemy infiltration through the Lao trail system. Twenty-two preselected targets were targeted for attack by Yankee Team and RLAF aircraft and U.S.-South Vietnamese ground units. Yankee Team planes would be utilized to strike hard targets deemed too hazardous for T-28 pilots to address, to suppress flack, and to provide overhead cover for MiG threats.

As the military situation in the South dramatically worsened and enemy infiltration increased, members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff pressured the Defense Secretary to implement the plan. The military men particularly wanted to destroy sections of Mugia Pass, a vital access point across the border from North Vietnam into Laos. However, because of continued political turbulence in Saigon, the ground portion scheduled to begin 1 November was scrubbed and tentatively deferred until the New Year.

The air interdiction campaign on the Lao trails was still pushed, with the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) desiring strikes on the central Tchepone logistical hub, and two critical bridges. Weighing the pros and cons, particularly the political consequences during a critical election year, the Administration was slow to respond. After the successful elections, during early December LBJ approved limited, but gradual pressure on enemy supply lines into and through Laos. The process was designed to intimidate and demonstrate to Hanoi leaders that their meddling in Laos and South Vietnam could lead to greater USG involvement in Southeast Asia. Named "Barrel Roll," a two-phase operation was envisioned over two to six months. F-100 series strikes were programmed to take place every three days. These would be supplemented by Royal Air Force (RLAF) bombing along the border from Savannakhet.

After de facto approval from the RLG, the closely controlled program began in mid-December. Initial results were mixed, but the fight was on. ³

³ John Smith, *Rolling Thunder: The Strategic Bombing Campaign North Vietnam 1965-1968* (Surrey: Air Research Publications, 1994) 26, 36-37. T Bailey, (www.af.mil/news/airman/0397/comando.htm).

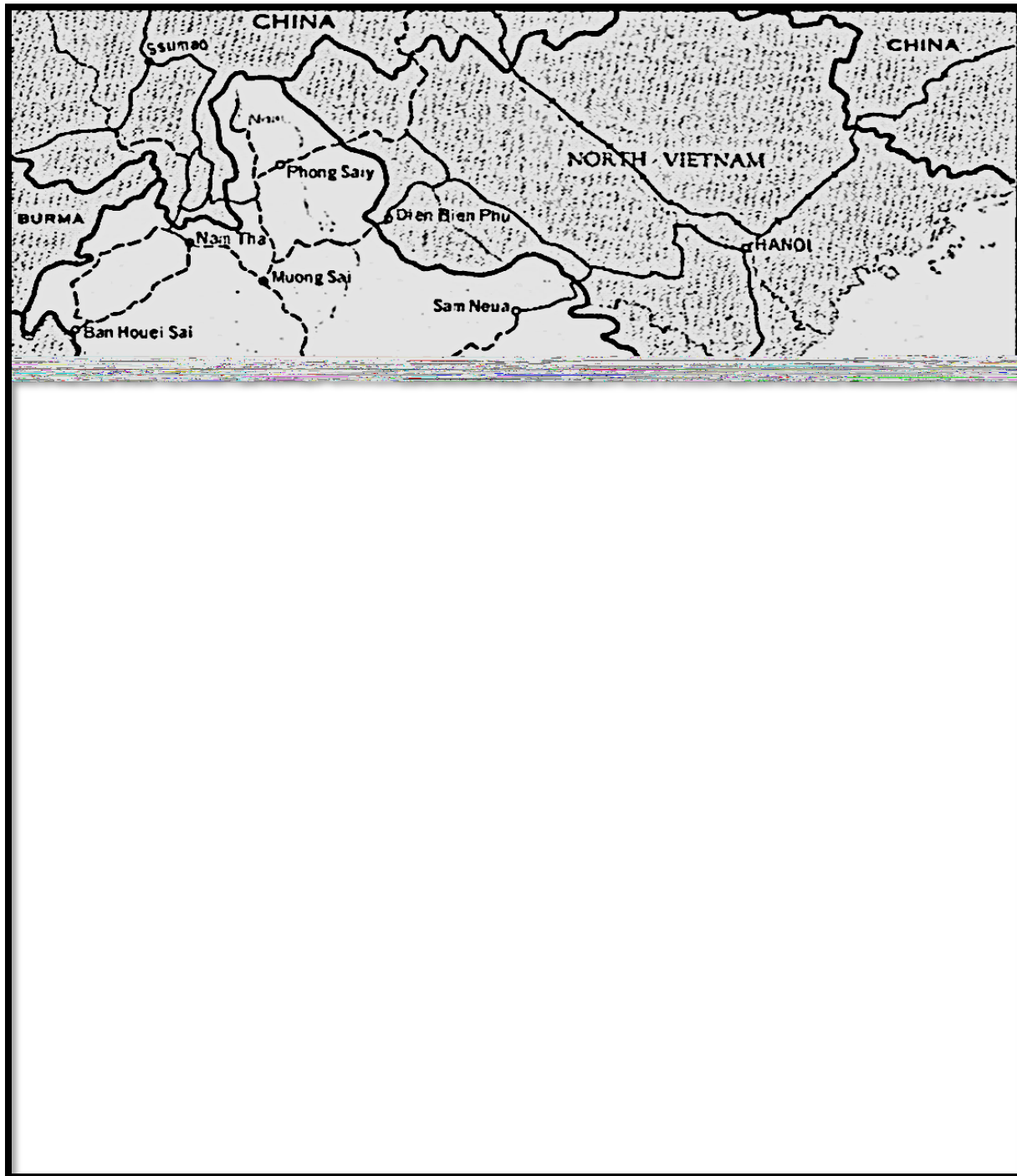
The year commenced on a sour note for the Lao Kingdom and the Royal Lao Government (RLG). The Royal Lao Army (RLA) operation envisioned by Lao Minister of Defense General Phoumi Nosavan in late November, was calculated to sweep and clear the upper Panhandle area in Military Region Three around Kham Keut, Lak Sao, and to challenge enemy logistic movements through Nape Pass, a mountain logistic route through the Annamite Range between North Vietnam and Laos. It was short lived. The Route-8 Lak Sao junction was back in enemy hands by 16 December.

Following a few weeks of being challenged by government offensives, and determined to expand the war in South Vietnam, Hanoi's leaders elected to act boldly. Shortly after the New Year, six Pathet Lao and four North Vietnamese Army battalions began pushing government forces even further away from the Ho Chi Minh Trail border areas, and systematically rolled up the remaining forces on the Na Khe Plateau. By 29 January, the enemy had regained total control of the Route-8A artery linking Lak Sao to the Route-12 crossroad at Nhommarath. Therefore, government forces abandoned remaining positions in the Na Kay area. ¹

By month's end, enemy units were reputed to be within eighteen kilometers of Thakhet (Site-40), a major river town opposite Thailand.

A substantial enemy attack was expected that would effectively sever the country at Laos' narrow waist. To preclude capture of government equipment, terrified FAN soldiers

¹ Central Intelligence Bulletin, Daily Brief, 01/30/64.



A key shaped map of Laos with an Military Region Three insert depicting the Panhandle area, passes (Nape and Mugia) through the Annamite mountain range, and principal enemy lines of communication (LOC).

CIA Map, 01/30/64.

prematurely destroyed twenty trucks, six armored cars, and several cannon. As the enemy response far exceeded what anyone expected under the abused Accords agreement, alarmed citizens anxiously prepared to evacuate across the river to Nakhon Phanom for refuge in Thailand. With few defense measures remaining, in effect, Thakhet virtually became an open city. Solicited to investigate the situation, as so frequently occurred in the past, conflicted ICC members slow to agree and respond, failed to react until the third week in February.

MILITARY REGION TWO

Reacting to increased Viet Minh presence and Pathet Lao artillery pressure in and around the Plain of Jars, a brace of FAR regiments were dispatched to Xieng Khouang Province. Over time, Groupement Mobile-13 (GM) from Paksane was moved by helicopters to Phu Khe Mountain (VS-19) and the vicinity overlooking the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley.² Vientiane-based GM-17 relocated to the hills of Phu San alongside Meo ADC west of Khang Khay, on the northern Plain of Jars. Additional FAR units were dispatched in support of Meo and FAN troops at the Phou Nong (VS-71) base located in the southern mountains along Route-7.

According to an embassy representative, on 1 January, in preparation for offensive operations, Kong Le met on PDJ neutral ground with Generals Amkha, La, and Siho Lamphouthacoul, Chief Lao Directorate of National Coordination/Chief of the Lao National Police. The following day a Requirements Office (RO)

² GM-A regiment containing roughly three infantry battalions.

representative visited General Amkha.³ The general requested enough small arms weapons to equip a special battalion that was initially comprised of a forty seven man unit formed to conduct operations in unspecified areas. He also indicated that Vang Pao's agents were in contact with 2,000 people desiring to defect to the Neutralist camp, and that the entire group required equipment. Following the meeting, bad weather prevented the army attaché officer from visiting Kong Le's headquarters to explore and further develop details relating to impending operations in Xieng Khouang Province.

After evaluating Amkha's statements, several negative aspects arose. Because of past difficulties relating to unfilled commitments and distrust between the two factions, ARMA was concerned about any reliable coordination between the Neutralists and Meo during proposed offensives along the stretch of Route-4 from Ban Tha Vieng to Xieng Khouang Ville. There was even doubt about Amkha's demands for additional weapons to arm a special battalion, since there were ample stocks of Soviet bloc arms and ammunition contained in the inventory. French advisors agreed, and ARMA placed Amkha's remarks on the back burner until Kong Le could verify the items requested.

Weakening Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma's credibility to keep the country intact, using military rather than political protocols, the enemy resumed attacks on RLG forces. During two months of action, successful offensives dislodged government troops from positions in the border areas of Sam Neua and Nong

³ Requirements Office: A unit of the U.S. Army attached to the U.S. Embassy to assess, oversee, and supply equipment to the Neutralist faction. Interchangeable with ARMA-the Army Attaché unit was ultimately responsible to the ambassador.

Het. ⁴

MR-2 AND PIGS

Following my CIC-6 test and ferry flight to Vientiane, I departed for a RON at the Sam Tong base with short, stocky, and always reliable Flight Mechanic C. Decosta. I enjoyed crewing with "C," as, unlike other older Filipino Flight Mechanics, he had aptly demonstrated in the past that he was not timid about restraining unruly passengers who consistently mobbed the helicopter during the loading process. ⁵

One of my first tasks included "operation pig distribution." After International Voluntary Service (IVS) veterinarian Bill Taylor's last visit to Sam Tong, and his declaration that little could be done to increase protein on the hoof because of the Military Region Two military situation, Pop Buell decided he could better deal with the refugee protein allocation himself. Therefore, he arranged to purchase several boar hogs from a farm near Bangkok and have them delivered up-country. His intention was to crossbreed them with the small, scraggly black and white mountain pigs to produce more meat and less fat.

⁴ Segment Sources:

Kenneth Conboy, *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos* (Boulder: Paladin Press, 1995) 101, 104, 106.

Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968, Volume 28, Laos Document 3, 02/15/64, Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Hilsman) to Secretary of State, Dean Rusk.

CIA Intelligence Information Cable, 01/29/64.

Edward Marolda and Fitzgerald, *The United States Navy and the Vietnam Conflict, From Military Assistance to Combat 1959-1965, Fleet Air Operations Over Laos*, Volume 2, (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 1986) 375. LBJ.

LBJ Library, priority message from Ambassador Leonard Unger to State, 01/02/64.

⁵ Flight Mechanics: This designation will be capitalized out of respect and admiration for the courageous men who fulfilled this billet.



Edgar "Pop" Buell standing in front of the H-34, Helio Courier fuel dump at Sam Tong, Laos.

Hazen Collection.

The animals' size and unwieldiness presented transportation problems for us helicopter crews. As the animals dribbled into Sam Tong on Caribous, distribution to outlying villages became an intermittent, but ongoing process. With difficulty, we utilized the hoist cable to lift the monsters into the cabin section. Some larger hogs were crated, others only had their feet and snout tied. In the latter case, it proved necessary for the flight mechanic to strap them to the deck with sturdy cargo tie downs. Despite this precaution, any porker movement in flight shook the entire helicopter. Even their breathing caused perceptible vibrations. It was a nasty process, for their material wastes fouled the plywood decking, usually leaking through tie down cutout holes onto the metal floor. Unless thoroughly cleaned in a timely manner, corrosion would quickly ensue.

Another more serious problem soon developed. Thai pigs harbored the debilitating and often deadly trichinosis parasite. Improperly cooked pork caused a serious situation. Therefore, in order to preserve the peoples' health, soldiers were obligated to slaughter every hog, native or otherwise, in each of the affected villages. Since it was Pop's intent to introduce the new strain of livestock, on this rare occasion, he ended up "eating crow." His assistant Blaine Jensen sympathized with his boss, for underneath all the old man's bluster and showmanship, as a defensive mechanism to cover his lack of education and civility, existed a genuinely caring individual. The old Indiana farmer considered the villagers his neighbors and, following the boar experiment, he had no other choice except to admit he had attempted something new. It had not succeeded, and resulted in community hog losses. As a result, he would take full responsibility and endeavor to rectify the mistake.

He did. We distributed locally uncontaminated, sows, boars, and piglets to affected settlements, purchased from any village that would sell them. It was not fun. During the loading process, smaller pigs were usually placed head first in jute type burlap bags to limit movement and prevent biting. This policy initially caused me problems, for with their rear ends exposed and protruding from the bags, they defecated and liberally urinated on the floor. This not only created a mess and horrible odors, particularly for those riding in the cabin section, it also presented a potential corrosion threat to the aircraft decking metal. After observing the results of the first piggley-wiggley operation, I solved the problem on a personal level by insisting that all porkers I carried were bagged both front and rear. QED. ⁶ The results were satisfactory for numerous future swine missions.

After common morning winter fog layers lifted in the bowl, providing clearance over the ridgeline and access to the Long Tieng Valley, except for fueling, I worked almost exclusively out of Vang Pao's site. The first two days were consumed shuttling troops to Padong (LS-05) and then northeast to Phu Khe (LS-19). Little had changed in areas around Phu Khe and Xieng Khouang Ville, where government forces still attempted to contain the PL and prevent movement south on Route-4 toward Tha Vieng (Site-13) and Tha Thom (Site-22).

During one trip, with Vang Pao assuming the role of General Direction, we toured the front. While his staff and bodyguards, old Plug included, climbed into the cabin section, Vang Pao eased comfortably into the left seat. I had previously flown with him and had considerable confidence in his decisions and intimate knowledge of the area. Although fluent in Lao, various

⁶ QED: A Latin term for the problem is solved.

tribal languages, and French, he did not speak English well. However, under advisor Vint Lawrence's language tutelage, he was considerably better than during the previous year. The words he articulated were spoken in harsh, guttural terms, very difficult for my untrained ear to comprehend. Therefore, amid much smiling and head bobbing, a pointee-talkee method assumed a major portion of our conversations.

Vang Pao was generally a pleasant person to work with, and highly respected by most pilots. He was another individual like Tony Poe, who would not lie to you to obtain results. At times, if he thought you were flying too close to enemy territory, he would become highly agitated. Then his normally smooth, tanned olive face would turn beet red. Of course, we always attempted to accomplish his bidding, for Vang Pao's approval and acceptance, as was The Alternate Customer's, was deemed essential to retain one's continued working status at Long Tieng.

Vang Pao enjoyed flying. I do not know which pilot first relinquished the controls of an aircraft to him, but I had heard scuttlebutt that he liked to "fly" both planes and helicopters. Therefore, I was ready when he asked to take control of the cyclic on the return to base. While I closely monitored the throttle and collective pitch, he flew an acceptable straight and level flight toward the south gap. I wondered how far he wanted to proceed during the approach, when he finally smiled and relinquished control to me. I was quite relieved, for what does one say to a vaunted leader in such a situation?

PARU RESCUE

On the morning of the fourth, without specifically knowing their exact location, Tony requested that I retrieve a besieged Thai PARU team from the Xieng Dat area. At the time, I had no

idea what the acronym PARU meant, or their function in Laos, but I would soon learn. Apparently, something serious had occurred at Site-26 to alienate the wavering commander there and, after being ambushed, the team hastily evacuated. A similar situation had occurred at least once before at this lowland site. The incident was probably initiated by mutual distrust, fluctuating allegiances, or some perceived slight between the often aggressive and authoritative Thai men and their Lao Theung subordinates.

I departed Long Tieng without much information, flying generally north along the Nam Ngum for twenty-five miles. Then, after passing the Long Pot mountain range and hilly Site-17 (Nam Chong) to the east, the countryside opened up into lower hills and savanna type expanses. Searching for only a few minutes, I discovered the team members scurrying in a line through the tall elephant grass, a fair distance south and east of Xieng Dat. At first glance, they did not appear to be pursued, but apparently had wasted no time distancing themselves from the Xieng Dat locale.

There were no openings sufficiently large enough to land in the immediate area. Even with my rotor downwash flattening the grass in a circular pattern, the hole was still not the proper size to accommodate the helicopter dimensions, or hover close to the ground. Therefore, I told "C" to attach the yellow horse collar (a padded oval device designed to fit under individuals' armpits and backs) to the cable hook and prepare to hoist the six men aboard. Because of excessive heat buildup from the drum hoist motor operation, resulting in a potential seizure, the down-up cycle was necessarily slow and time restricted as per the flight manual description. Fortunately, there was no enemy action and little drama involved in the operation. Therefore, with a minimum of anxiety, I merely performed what I had been

trained to do in the Corps. While I hovered as low as possible to expedite a speedy extraction, "C" skillfully manipulated the hoist switch and supposedly cleared my tail. Within a respectable period, we lifted the entire team of happy campers to safety.⁷

Once on the ground at Long Tieng, "C" and I basked in accolades reserved for the rescue of fellow combatants.

It was my first adventure and excitement since the Don Romes episode the previous year, and a harbinger of the future gut-wrenching SAR operations. However, as often occurs during the course of our daily lives, to balance the credit-debit ledger, one must generally "pay the piper," and usually such ventures as mine exact a price. The recent incident was no exception, and my mood drastically changed upon discovering two inches neatly shaved off all four tail rotor blades. Because of aerodynamics known in helicopter operations as translating tendency, and with an airframe designed to streamline in flight, the H-34 exhibited a hovering tendency to drift to the left and hang tail low. Apparently, while hovering in the normal tail low configuration for a considerable period within the confines of the circle, I had drifted or descended too low, and the delicate fiberglass tail rotor blades contacted the iron tough saw grass.

I could not believe what I saw. First, concentrating all my attention on maintaining a steady hover while monitoring instruments, I had no conception that I was low enough to incur such damage. Second, with a damaged anti-torque system whirling at very high RPM, curiously, I had felt no unusual vibrations through the tail rotor pedals from damage that should normally have caused a grossly unbalanced condition. Despite all

⁷ Without prior practice, little communication, or coordination, I was often amazed at some of our Filipino Flight Mechanics' spur-of-the-moment expertise in similar situations. But "C" was exceptional.

rationalizations, it was obvious that I could not work or even ferry the aircraft to Udorn in its present condition. I was effectively grounded.⁸

More than a little embarrassed and upset over the misfortune of damaging a scarce helicopter, I called Udorn on the high frequency radio net with the bad news. Surprisingly, the CPH office indicated a pre-balanced tail rotor would be sent to 20A as soon as possible (ASAP). Additionally, lacking flight time, I was to switch to and operate Hotel-12. Despite the tail rotor interlude, I went right back to work and did quite well that day.

Because the damage was incurred operationally under harsh and potentially hostile conditions, there was no recrimination from management or a statement required from me.⁹

Before the RON was over, combat action and flight time accelerated in Military Region Two. During the fighting, as victory appeared within reach in retaking Tha Lin Noi (VS-18), a company of royal troops left the field on the Plain of Jars and the operation failed. Further east, Kong Le's Neutralists refused to defend their Xieng Khouang Ville sector in support of Meo units attempting to sever the road network. ARMA people had been exactly right in their assessment of the two units working closely together. Moreover, General Vang Pao seethed over the Neutralist failure to support the attack. Other FAR units also failed to achieve their objectives, and incurred heavy losses.

⁸ This condition was called aircraft grounded for parts, or AGP.

⁹ Because of sand blasting erosion and incidents such as mine, under pressure from the military, the Sikorsky factory later retrofitted all fiberglass tail rotor blades with manufactured aluminum components. From that time, the amazingly tough elephant grass took a back seat to harder metal, which prevented damage during further hovering events.

The nature of semi-combat flying was exciting to me, for I was experiencing an actual taste of war, observing artillery duels, and conducting wounded evacuation to Sam Tong. Injuries from shelling of those I hauled were decidedly more pronounced than the small arms wounds of previous evacuations. I marveled and was impressed that none of the wounded whimpered, cried, or screamed from their grievous injuries. On one hand, I was happy to have the means to save lives, but on the other hand, it seemed counterproductive to haul devices of death into sites and then remove the results in the form of mangled, torn flesh and blood. Realistically, it indeed was that kind of job.

The infrastructure and medical facilities at Sam Tong continued to improve to the point where seriously wounded individuals were treated and cared for properly. Helping to implement this, hundreds of male nurses were in various stages of training. ¹⁰

CHANH

Medic Chanh was admittedly one of the most effective men training new personnel. Chanh, an Udorn Thai, also held Lao citizenship. After soliciting an up-country job and informing Vang Pao that he had trained at the Medcin Assistant School in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, VP hired him to help Pop's refugee program. As USAID provided no funding for a medical program, Vang Pao paid all his medics.

Sometime after Doctor Weldon's arrival in Vientiane, Vang Pao of that burden. He began by paying the medics from a petty cash account. However, to compensate Chanh commensurate with his

¹⁰ Although Vang Pao's mandate and tribal taboos at the time disallowed females from participating to this point, this would soon change.

responsibilities, it became necessary to initiate a formal USAID hiring procedure. This was performed at the Vientiane Public Health Office. While examining Chanh's application forms, "Jiggs" became suspicious concerning possible falsification of the man's educational claims and medical qualifications. However, after examining the intelligent youth's proffered medical certificates, and verbally ascertaining that he was conversant regarding the latest U.S. pharmaceuticals and their field application, the doctor elected to continue using the medic. In addition, cognizant of the skillful work Chanh had already performed up-country, Weldon chose to overlook any potential misrepresentation and added him to USAID's roles. It was a wise move for the program, as Chanh knew the medical business very well, and served a useful purpose for a number of years.

Chanh and I had first interacted at Pha Khao the previous year, when I gave him rides to Sam Tong and outlying sites. A friendly and likable person, he spoke English well and claimed that he had worked for, and was trained, by Tom Dooley. Like Blaine Jensen, Tom Ward, and Father Luke Brouhard, he provided me valuable and interesting information regarding aspects of mountain life and the war.

Much later, shocking facts emerged that Chanh was not who he purported, but a fraud, an impostor.

Over time, as a fund-raising scheme for the organization, the Tom Dooley Foundation desired to re-open the Ban Houei Sai hospital. Doctor Weldon's superiors assigned him to ascertain the feasibility, or necessity, of such a project. Honoring the obligation, Jiggs journeyed to the town to evaluate the actual practicability of such a facility. As the plan was nothing but a Dooley Foundation fund-raising scheme, he had already made a prejudgment, and was opposed to the plan. However, political

cogs were already in motion stateside, and major airlines agreed to provide stewardesses gratis for temporary work at the hospital. With political pressure and free labor promised, the hospital opened for business within two years.

During the course of his investigations and inspections, Jiggs conversed with the ethnic Lao caretaker of the disused property. The man, born and raised in the Lao border area close to Dien Bien Phu, had worked as a cook in Dooley hospitals, and claimed to have known all the Dooley's staff. When Weldon inquired about Chanh, the man indicated that he had never worked for Dooley. ¹¹ This information, coupled with Weldon's prior doubts regarding Chanh's medical "qualifications," stimulated him to query the Thai medical facility supervisor where Chanh claimed he had received training. Much to his chagrin, Jiggs discovered that his favorite medic had never attended the institution. It was apparent that Chanh had never received the formal medical training he claimed, but instead, the extraordinary man was self-educated from extensive reading and studying medical literature. Furthermore, his certificates had been obtained by providing money under the table and, in typical Southeast Asian style, no one could adequately explain to Weldon how this fraud had occurred.

Admittedly, the fact that Chanh had failed to obtain formal medical training and appropriate certificates to satisfy USAID regulations did nothing to detract from the excellent work he accomplished over the years in Laos. One can only surmise that

¹¹ When later questioned by another USAID worker, the man admitted he did not know everyone who worked at the areas' two Dooley Hospitals. He also stated that some of the Dooley staff had received para-medic training at various locations in Indochina.

he received adequate and excellent para-medical training at Indochina facilities by very competent personnel.¹²

Such secrets are difficult to maintain, and knowledge of Chanh's deception eventually leaked to the local populace. After Sam Tong residents discovered that he was not who he claimed, the resulting lost face caused the disgraced medic to leave Site-20.

After Jiggs dismissed Chanh Americans at Long Tieng enlisted him to train Vang Pao's para-medics. Chanh performed this task for only two or three months until Doctor Weldon discovered this ploy to keep Chanh in the area. When Jiggs complained to Vint Lawrence and others at The Alternate, they terminated Chanh.

Chanh maintained both Lao and Thai citizenship. For a time, he operated a private health clinic in Vientiane and then lived in Chiang Rai. Finally, he returned to Udorn to start a taxi business, which in time prospered.¹³

While fuel drops continued at Padong, I spent most of the fifth shuttling troops and ammunition from Site-5 to Phu Khe in support of the joint Meo-FAR operation. Like so many times before, Mike Marshall patiently waited to relieve me at Long Tieng. After I gave Mike an abbreviated briefing about the

¹² Author Note: One only has to look at the professions in early America for similarities. With a lack of money and few universities in much of the nation, particularly in the rural areas, aspiring doctors and lawyers apprenticed (read law or medicine) with practicing physicians or attorneys. Depending on the person's intelligence level and learning ability, this could take years. The apprentice often took over his mentor's business upon his death or retirement.

¹³ Blaine Jensen Letters, #1, 02/13/96, #2, 03/02/96. In Blaine's opinion, while the medical certificates were definitely forged, Chanh had been afforded excellent training. Blaine heard that Chanh performed some work with the PARU in Thailand. Doctor Weldon, Email.

action to the east, he drove me to Sam Tong to await transportation south. Since late incoming traffic was generally never announced, I would have to take my chances and perhaps spend another night at Sam Tong. It was all part of the job.

Because of an inadequate amount of clean water to bathe, after a few days up-country, one's body became quite funky with dust and dried sweat. It mattered little while working, as everyone exuded similar odors. However, before returning to civilization, so as not to unduly impinge on others' olfactory sensitivities, I generally attempted to rectify this condition. Therefore, using rusty cold water from a fifty-five-gallon drum by the side of the warehouse, I ritualistically washed dirt from my face, arms, and chest, and attempted to shave. Then I went into the dark crew hut to collect my few belongings, and change into fresh smelling clothes reserved for the trip home. I was anxious to return, as a sore throat that first manifested itself on the 31st lingered in the cold, damp conditions of the 4,000-foot valley, and had blossomed into a nasty cold.

I exited the hut at the sound of an approaching plane. An older Meo woman, who appeared well beyond childbearing age, waited outside holding a stark naked baby.¹⁴ I was curious about her presence for, to discourage theft, village people were instructed not to congregate around our quarters. The emaciated child looked dreadful, displaying shrunken arms, neck, and a substantial head lesion. Gesturing with one arm toward the baby, the woman obviously sought a favor. However, I did not fully understand exactly what she wanted until she extracted a withered, brown breast from her loose black blouse and began kneading the leathery appendage. In an explicit manner, she graphically indicated that her mammary glands produced no milk.

¹⁴ Because of the extremely harsh life in the mountains, it was virtually impossible to accurately calculate a person's age.

Despite a shock to my Anglo-Saxon-Presbyterian sensitivity, it was impossible not to fully comprehend her exact meaning.

Usually Pop distributed canned milk to mothers, who often journeyed miles to Sam Tong from distant villages with their babies. Sometimes they walked for days to obtain the handouts. At the time, Pop was attending an important USAID meeting in Vientiane to discuss the continuing influx of refugees, a critical shortage of canned milk, and other essential commodities at Sam Tong. Perhaps because of the child's visibly poor condition, or the milk shortage, whoever was in charge had decided to turn the woman away, and she desperately sought help from the first available Western person in the area. I felt embarrassed and helpless. The scene tore at my heartstrings. Then I remembered half a loaf of bread in the hut that I had brought to make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. After offering her the bread, I attempted to pantomime chewing a piece and giving the partially digested mush to the baby. This seemed to satisfy her, and she left with a smile. Despite my attempted altruism, I knew the child would not survive long without proper nourishment, medical attention, and shelter from the harsh elements. All these negative variables contributed to the high rate of infant mortality in the society.

The sound I had heard was a Caribou landing with a final load for the day. After exchanging pleasantries with PIC Bob LaTurner, I deadheaded on B-851 for an hour flight to Wattay Airport. Air America and Bird and Son Air Operations clerks indicated that there were no scheduled flights to Udorn that afternoon. Therefore, I decided to undertake a ground-water-ground journey home.

After taxiing to Tha Deua boat landing and finding the border guard absent, I boarded a water taxi to cross the wide Mekong to Nong Khai. From there, I hailed a young truck driver



A Thai passenger riverboat that crossed the Mekong River from Nong Khai, Thailand, to the landing dock at Tha Deua, Laos, and back.
Author Collection.

and then shouted in my best Thai to the occupant in the open cab, "*Bai Udorn krup?*" The two men in the wooden compartment, looking much like teenagers, laughed, joked, and seemed to exhibit a party attitude. As we pounded dangerously over the bumps and potholes of the still-unimproved laterite road at high speed, the driver baffled me. Throughout the ride, he turned his body to the right side of the cab with his head swiveled toward the road. I asked Ed Reid about this later and he explained that northeastern truck drivers used this position to protect Buddha, who was perched on their right shoulders.

Following a wild, dusty ride over the rutted track to the first circle leading south toward the airfield, I dismounted and offered the driver a few baht. After a short two-baht samlor ride, I returned to an empty house.

As we generally RON only once a month, the trip marked my final one upcountry until February.

Following an RON, I generally required a day or two to clean up, rest, and reorient my thinking from military to civilian pursuits. First, Sang would boil water and mix hot liquid with cold in a huge aluminum pan so I could scrub off, a la metal douche bath, the grungy effects of four or five days in the field. Within a couple of days of good food and rest, I was feeling much better and went back to work on the swimming pool.

The pool was not the only project under construction at the airfield. For several months, portending future air requirements, Navy Seabees and other contractors had struggled to construct a new taxiway and a sizeable concrete warm-up apron at the end of Runway-30. It looked like we would eventually have a first class airfield and the capability to cope with an influx of military aircraft should a future requirement evolve. A new commercial terminal was also in the last stages of completion.

Swirling red dust from large earth moving equipment and constantly moving vehicles created hazards for our lungs and taxiing helicopters. The addition of machines, seconded to us by our Seabee friends, allowed us to proceed with the pool excavation. A concrete batching plant, recently erected across the parking ramp-taxiway, was already targeted to supply our needs. Art, the gray-haired man representing Officer in Charge of Construction (OICC), lived in a small house near the entrance of the Air America access road with his Greek wife, and closely monitored the work.

In addition to the pool, responding to future requirements, other construction projects like a school (initially called the Club annex) were in progress toward the rear of the compound. Dining room expansion was delayed until the bar separating the



A broad overhead view from an H-34 of the Air America facility looking north from the Royal Thai Army Base. A concrete batching plant used to produce a product for airfield expansion and build our pool is located in the upper right corner. UH-34D parking ramp is forward of the Madrivers drainage ditch surrounding part of the complex.

C.J. Abadie Collection.

dining and movie rooms, deemed too small, was relocated to the front porch, and business commenced. In addition to a need to service more diners, the old bar was highly distracting to sober patrons in other facilities, particularly during bingo night, when bar chatter masked Rivero's voice while calling numbers. Under pressure to complete the pool work ASAP, Company supervisors and local labor were used. Supplies were purchased directly from wholesalers or retailers.

Just when we believed the excavation job was complete, after reviewing the plans, Taipei engineering staff demanded changes. Previously, we had performed all the work ourselves with free labor, scrounged equipment, and materials. Realizing that we were at a point where money would be required for additional material and specialty items like rebar and concrete, Ben Moore journeyed to the head shed to solicit help. Convincing his superiors that we were serious about the project, he returned with a promise of 5,000 dollars, but at a cost. When Company engineers examined the blueprints, they insisted that we expand lengthwise dimensions to reflect a 75,000-gallon pool. They also stipulated that a greater slope from the shallow to the deep end be drastically graded to preclude any diving accidents. As Company headquarters now had the greatest monetary interest in the project, they dictated policy. Everyone involved in the construction was upset over the new requirements, particularly our tall Chinese facility engineer, Bill Lee, who returned to the drawing board. He was apologetic about the required changes, but realistic enough to know that without them no funding would materialize.

With the new specifications to satisfy, I found myself the busiest I had been since arriving in Udorn. There were setbacks. The enlarged hole created deeper vertical sides and inevitable cave-ins. Short tempers and bossy take-charge people did not

alleviate worker stress in the dining room expansion or pool projects. On some occasions, arguments between pilots grew so bitter that work temporarily ceased. Ben Moore must have been privy to some of this hostility, for he devoted an amusing paragraph to the problem in his January facility report to Taipei. Granted, probably since the inception of flying machines, pilots rarely agreed a hundred percent about anything, and there was bound to be friction over even minor items. In spite of petty differences, realizing that the common good was involved, the projects moved forward.

I encountered a problem one day with fellow pilot Bob Hitchman. I had never seen Bob at the excavation site before. Suddenly, probably with an agenda to impress the Base Manager or his peers, he decided that he would summarily assume a supervisory position. As I operated a large forklift machine on the pool's edge, as if I was his peon, he began shouting abrasive and demanding orders to me from the bottom of the pit. Those of us involved in the project had been doing just fine before Bob's appearance, and I took umbrage at his meddling and perceived abuse. I was no longer a flunky First Officer who deferred to the wishes of an aggressive Captain, especially during non-flying situations. Consequently, we had a few heated words. Furthermore, if he insisted on being the chief, fine. I left the project. As I expected, having satisfied whatever agenda he planned, Hitchman's tenure at the construction site was short, and with minimum flying, I concentrated my energy full time at the pool.

By month's end, all required changes were effected and the excavation's difficult work was completed. Next, we installed and cemented a thick laterite layer to form a hard sub-base for the pool floor. Last on the schedule prior to the floor pour was the installation of box type reinforcing steel and then wooden

side forms. Cooperation in obtaining serious pilot volunteers was still minimal. Therefore, beside Vichit and Boon, additional facility labor was employed from Jack Park's manpower pool. The men were helpful, but the work was foreign to them and they required constant monitoring and supervision. This tended to exhaust me, and I wondered if it was all worth the effort.

Captain Jerry McEntee disappeared. His absence was noticeable, for he was near the top of the office pecking order, perhaps even eventually in line for an important top job. Over time, rumors filtered down to us that Jerry had departed for Katmandu, Nepal, to work for Air Ventures, in what would become a three-year USAID contract.

Since the fall of 1962, when the Chinese briefly invaded northern India, the adversaries had been at each other's throats. ¹ Therefore, using the cover of the U.S. Embassy and USAID, Chinese border activity was closely monitored. Many were envious, as Jerry's hurried move was well timed, calculated to avoid the boredom of reduced Lao flying and avoid the unknown consequences of a long rumored political take-over of Air America by yet another unnamed company.

Most recently, I was shocked to hear on Voice of America (VOA) radio that Slick Airways was going to be our new owner. Slick was the same airline that delivered some members of my helicopter squadron from Travis Air Force Base to Kadena Air Force Base, Okinawa, in 1961. I was not impressed with the outfit's maintenance, for the first plane lost an engine an hour after departing the California coastline. This resulted in a return to San Francisco and an overnight delay.

¹ Chinese Mainland troops pulled out of India because of devastating crop failures and food shortages throughout the nation.

No one else admitted to hearing the VOA broadcast or knowing anything about an impending take-over. I was quite aware that one had to take VOA reporting at face value, for many times political agendas and USG policy skewed the facts, and the information was not entirely reliable. In contrast, I discovered more accurate reporting beamed to Southeast Asia over the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) station. For this reason, I attempted to gain a cross section of information, even listening to Hanoi or China Radio late at night.

I learned from Deanie that Fairy was travelling the States to visit her sister, and then was going to Japan to work for World Travel Services. Concerned she might attempt to contact my folks and cause trouble, I sent a cautionary letter home. I reiterated that as far as I was concerned our relationship was completely and irrevocably finished. If they wanted to be nice to her, that was their business, but I advised against any continuous discourse. In pleading my case, I stated that Fairy had become very poisonous lately, slandering all of us. Most people realized that she was a spurned woman who vented her spleen on anyone who cared to listen. Accordingly, she was classified as a wacko-weirdo. I considered myself very lucky indeed to have broken off the relationship. At the time, I assumed that I had properly handled the breakup. However, it now appeared that I should have informed her of my true reasons. (I did not delve into the sordid details with my parents.) I believed it unfortunate that one had to crush someone's self-esteem in order to emphasize certain facts. I began to understand that some people do not understand kindness, and would require a kick in the teeth to accept reality.

My advice to the folks was timely, for not long afterward they received unsigned correspondence from the phantom, which they forwarded to me. It was not too difficult to perceive who

wrote the slanderous letter, but not the motivation. It only reinforced what I thought about Fairy's out-of-control mental condition. As she was out of the country, I could not do anything about it then, but vowed to pursue legal means against her if she ever repeated the act.

Since I was commenting about my life and its aspects, I continued the lengthy letter home discussing selected altruistic and philosophical features related to the Lao war. Without going into minute details, well indoctrinated and spouting Edgar Buellisms, I began by stating:

"America supported the Meo because, as opposed to the majority Lao, they would fight. The King, Savang Vatthana, visited the normally abused and ignored Meo for the first time recently, which I assumed could mark the beginning of many improvements for the people."

Then I mentioned the "old American Hoosier" and Sam Tong refugee camp of an estimated 5,000 souls, and praised the USAID-IVS organizations assisting the refugees. I stated that:

"...wars not only employed guns and ammunition to achieve ends, but also required food, schools, clothes, medicine, and good old Yankee ingenuity. So far, U.S. foreign aid resulted not only in friendship, but was also a distinct factor in alleviating human suffering among the hill tribes."

In discussing Pop's canned milk distribution for babies, to add local color, I mentioned the recent withered breast anecdote.

During my last RON at Sam Tong, Pop indicated that he could use any toys he could obtain for **his** children. Some American toy manufactures had already sent him balloons, rubber balls, and the like. Since my Father worked in New York, and dealt with numerous companies and organizations, in the interest of humanity, I asked him to solicit goodies for the Meo children.

The more I wrote, the more incensed I became regarding the confusion and seemingly senseless shedding of blood over such a worthless country--a country supporting indolent people who cared for little else than growing sufficient rice to eat and making love. I understood it was USG policy to help stem the communist tide in Southeast Asia, but I wondered how we could effect this with our limited strength and tools. ²

My recent trip to the Lao capital tended to foster my low opinion of the Lao and area, when I noted visible decay of the town and the apathetic attitude of the people. As a relative newcomer to the region, I considered laziness an endemic disease that bred and festered throughout Southeast Asia. Naturally, the cultural bases were very old and much different from ours, but that still did not excuse their attitude that "it does not matter." Whether it was the Thai-Mai Pen Rai, the Lao-Bo Pen Yong, or a similar term used in India, they all related to the same rationalization regarding anything beyond their grasp or control. I never heard anything like that in Japan or the Philippines. I supposed the extreme lack of concern was the main reason why Western workers after leaving the area, when asked to comment about the people, invariably threw up their hands and shouted they are impossible.

"When compared to advanced civilizations and the vast technological advances in western culture, the Lao had a great deal to learn. How many times did our forefathers utter, "It does not matter," then squat on their cans, and do nothing? Very seldom, from my understanding of our history. Our people stood

² At this particular time during my Air America tenure, I failed to understand the overall scope and depth of the South Vietnamese and Ho Chi Minh Trail involvement within the big picture of Southeast Asia military and geopolitics. Few of us with Air America did, and I dare say none of the American people did at the time.

up and did what was necessary. During the difficult process of nation building, they sweated, strived, fought, and died to better themselves. This was accomplished with precious little help from anyone, and, except for end phases during the Revolutionary War, certainly no foreign aid."

Of course, my mentor, the highly opinionated Edgar Buell, a dangerous man to trifle with, stoked many of my viewpoints. Closely adhering to his biases, my feelings toward the Meo were warm, and strikingly different toward the Lao. Here were a people genuinely worth supporting. Still, not all of Pop's psychobabble influenced my thinking, for during my increased participation in, and closeness to actual operations, I formed my own positive opinions. When one worked directly with, and observed people fighting and dying, how could one not become emotionally involved with them?

At this point in the letter home, I struggled so much with my emotions that I had to cease writing.

FLIGHTS

My final scheduled flights during the month took place on the eleventh and fourteenth. Since I had accumulated a reasonable amount of flight time up-country, if local missions arose, I expected to be tapped to accomplish these.

The Coast Guard UH-34G model, Hotel-17, was rolled out of the hangar for a test flight. Jerry McEntee had left Udorn, and Wayne Knight, who normally flight-checked aircraft before releasing them, was on home leave. Therefore, Dick Elder accompanied Pascual and me to conduct the test procedures and airworthiness checks. I believed one reason for the expanded crew was the CPH Office's desire to acquaint pilots with the unfamiliar throttle system. Also, as provisional Club Manager,

in addition to minimum upcountry flying, Dick had to scrounge sufficient flight time to remain proficient.

My next flight supported the STARCOM project and U.S. Army Signal Corps radio relay sites scattered throughout the northeast. Starting in a large clockwise sweep, John Timmons and I flew the paymaster to remote sites at Donut, Round Tree, Little Dipper, Corn Patch, all the way south to Ubon (S-19), and back to Udorn. Shutting down at each site, the round robin consumed the entire day and did nothing to enrich me.

RABIES

During the dry season rabid dogs constituted a real and present danger to all humans in the Udorn area. Nineteen sixty-four was no exception, and was a nasty and unsafe year for the malady. Packs of vicious dogs, foraging for subsistence, roamed the streets and fallow rice paddies surrounding Udorn. During the best of times, they were a sorry sight--dirty, infected with mange, and other canine diseases. Few Thais kept dogs as pets, and they were often abused by well-directed kicks. However, the wild beasts were never culled or eliminated by the locals because of a Buddhist belief that one of the animals could be a reincarnated relative.

An increased incidence of dog bites and rabies elevated the problem to new heights. There was a story circulating regarding an infected patient at the Udorn hospital who bit a doctor before dying. The "Ghoul," our clinics huge, slobbering Chinese male nurse, was bitten and had to endure twenty one days of painful anti-rabies injections in his abdominal area. Then, when some U.S. Army personnel were attacked and bitten, Army and town representatives met and implemented a simple plan calculated to eradicate the beasts without directly assuming the responsibility of killing them. Periodically, under the cover of

night, personnel drove a Jeep outside city limits, particularly along Thahan Tanon, and discharged chunks of poisoned meat beside the road. Then, absolving the distributor of blame, it strictly became a matter of choice if the animal ate the meat.

The method proved highly effective, as daylight revealed carcasses lining the klongs. However, we had to endure consequences of the kill. The animals were left to putrefy, as no one would assume the responsibility to retrieve and bury the remains. Although a nuisance for a few days, largely because of stink and flies, the tropics and land soon claimed the bloated corpses.

As a precaution, I attempted to keep Caesar on the back porch and off the street during this critical period. However, since the perimeter fence was composed of barbed wire strands on the side and rear of the house, wild dogs often trotted through the yard. Caesar was a spirited dog and, doing what dogs do, he occasionally got into fights with them. He was a most unusual dog, in that he rarely bit opponents, preferring to swat an adversary with his enormous paws. I saw more than one animal bowled over during these confrontations.

Because Louie Jones had been terminated after shooting a dog, and the incident was reported to authorities by neighbors, I was hesitant to use my hog leg to scare or dispatch one. Therefore, when a particularly nasty looking animal, covered with sores and frothing at the mouth, entered the yard, I went after him with a brush hook. Bent on survival, he managed to elude me, but not before I managed to wound him.

As a testament to the joint Thai-American response to the rabies epidemic, the incidence of human suffering markedly decreased.

Results of the poisonings were graphically displayed to me one morning during the period. After completing tasks at the Air

America facility, I turned left onto the main road and headed for the house on my motorbike. In a spacious area, perhaps in former rice paddies off to the right side of the road, I observed a number of agitated vultures flapping their wings over two bloated canines. Several birds circled overhead, awaiting clearance instructions to land. More birds landed as I stopped the Honda to watch. Although an extraordinarily ugly animal, I was mesmerized by the vultures' graceful approaches and gentle touchdowns, while manipulating their enormous wings to effect a brief hover, before a perfect landing. To a helicopter pilot, their ability to achieve such precision flight appeared marvelous.

Deciding to remain and absorb what marked a new experience, my attention focused on their main activity: the meal. Dozens of large birds, appearing even larger during the frenzied wing flapping, violently jockeyed for position in their quest to devour the most succulent portion of the carrion. In no time, pecking orders were painfully established. Then, almost as a coup de gras, winners thrust their long necks deep into the corpses' orifices, emerging with the most tasty, bloody morsels. During the squawk, flap, hop, peck, tear, and thrust process, Mother Nature's efficient clean up team was fascinating to watch.

After an hour, I had had enough viewing and left. The canine destruction was well advanced, and I felt a bit queasy from the gory sight and horrible smell exuded by death and the scavengers. Still, I was happy to have observed the rare spectacle, for if someone else had described what I saw that day, I doubt if I would have believed them.

MILITARY ASPECTS

During the third week, with assistance from the British and Soviet Ambassadors and the International Control Commission (ICC), Princes Souvanna Phouma and Souvannavoung met in enemy-controlled Sam Neua Town to discuss the thorny Lao situation. They agreed again on the principles for the coalition, and reaffirmed the 1962 Geneva Accords doctrine. Since Vientiane was under rightist control, the Prime Minister proposed that the so-called coalition government be relocated to Luang Prabang as a neutral, demilitarized seat of authority. Although an old concept, the two princes appeared to be leaning toward such a solution to the Lao crises. However, current hostilities in Military Region Three, and the condition of flux in Military Region Two, thwarted further progress toward this goal.

The Royal Lao Air Force received limited aid under the USG-funded Lao Military Assistance Program (MAP), but the Geneva Accords of 1954 and 1962 restricted USG training in the country. Therefore, as with other programs calculated to circumvent the Accords, Thailand was the logical alternative for training. Throughout January and February, in Washington, Laos, and Thailand, there was continuing serious discussion regarding the Joint Chiefs of Staff proposed deployment of a Special Air Warfare (SAW) detachment from Florida to Udorn. The detachment of four T-28s, pilots, and thirty five support personnel would augment Commanding General Thao Ma's small air force in the event of an all-out enemy offensive. The unit's mission would provide logistic support, assist Lao Air Force maintenance training, and provide advice for planning air strikes in Laos. In addition, the program would provide cover for T-28 presence in Thailand and aid Thai counterinsurgency efforts.

Following Ambassador Martin's solicitation, early in January, Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn and Air Chief

Marshal Dawee Chunlasap authorized transfer of two T-28s from Thai stocks to supplement General Ma's four aircraft. ³

Major General Joseph H. Moore assumed command of the USAF Second Air Division from outgoing Major General Rollen H. Anthis at Tan Son Nhut Airfield, South Vietnam, with responsibility for all air assets in Vietnam and some in Thailand. Despite the initial strong objections of the Chief of Joint U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group, Thailand (JUSMAAG/T), CINCPAC assigned operational control of Detachment-6 to the General, with the explicit understanding that Ambassador Unger would actually control Lao T-28 operations. The logic was that the detachment's mission and the first Air Commando Squadron in South Vietnam were similar. The Division was subordinated to Saigon-based MACV and the Thirteenth Air Force in the Philippines for future operations in Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam. ⁴

Those of us in Air America capable of performing the job would soon flash across the General's radar screen.

Prompted by an earlier report by Major General Victor H. Krulak (USMC), Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities, the Joint Chiefs of Staff urged Defense Secretary Robert T. McNamara to reestablish reconnaissance overflights of Laos to obtain intelligence information essential to the defense of South Vietnam. The Secretary, in conjunction with the all-encompassing Operations Plan-34 (OPLAN-34) secret

³ William P. Bundy, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, Letter to Roger Hilsman, 01/11/63. Project *CHECO*, *Beginning of Air Operations in Laos*, Internet, 07/07/02.
Victor Anthony, 93.

⁴ Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction in Southern Laos 1960-1968: the United States Air Force in Southeast Asia* (Washington: GPO, 1993) 24.
Project *CHECO*, downloaded from the Internet, 07/07/02.

concept to wage war against North Vietnam, decided to commence high-level U-2 flights in February over both Vietnams, Laos, and Cambodia. ⁵ ⁶

Continued enemy action east of Thakhet, and loss of territorial control, gleaned from eyes on the ground, produced reliable intelligence regarding logistical border areas. This information stimulated additional concern in USG. An end of the month message stated:

"The Panhandle remains open to use by communists all the way down to South Vietnam and Cambodia. The Panhandle is the critical area because of its location. We should re-establish friendly control over the whole southern half of the Panhandle to prevent its use by the Viet Minh, to cordon off Cambodia against direct communist pressure, to protect the Thai frontier, and to secure the RLG flank." ⁷

Dick Elder returned from a Hong Kong vacation toting a bulky infra-red space heater for me. As the cool season was waning and had not been particularly harsh, I stored the device for use during the following season.

HOWARD

In the quest to improve his family's living standards, Howard Estes continuously sought potential moneymaking projects. To date he had not been overly successful. Howard had previously invested money with Ed Bashista, a former fixed wing driver in Vientiane, who quit Air America and relocated to Pattaya to

⁵ General Krulak presented the commencement address at my Quantico, Virginia, second lieutenant commissioning ceremony in 1957.

⁶ Edward Greenhalgh, *The Air Force in Southeast Asia: The RF-101 Voodoo 1961-1970* (The Office of Air Force History, 1979) 52. William Leary 1964 Notes, UTD.

⁷ Norman Hannah, *The Key to Failure* (Maryland: Madison, 1987) 121.

build trimarand (triple hulled) sailboats. I had visited Ed once and was appalled at the poor living conditions that he and his family endured while he struggled to build his first boat. It seemed all that kept him from poverty was Estes' money. Consistent with Howard's luck, the boat scheme proved to be too good an idea for an American, and, as often happened in Thailand, was eventually usurped by locals.

One day, while I was checking my mail at the Air America compound, Howard approached me with a current scheme to improve his status and lifestyle. He claimed to be researching a tentative plan to form a two-aircraft helicopter company to support USG projects in Thailand. He did not divulge where he received his information, but indicated that USG desired the option to select small economical outfits to perform area contracts. He further stated that a two-ship operation provided the most efficient and customer satisfying business. I suspected that the latest rumors of a Company name change or takeover might have influenced his interest in such a project. However, there were a lot of ifs and buts involved, and because of Howard's lack of tangible accomplishments, I was pessimistic and wanted to see hard data. Still, I believed his idea was essentially sound, and a firm government contract might actually be rewarding. The idea of co-owning a small company, while pursuing a vocation I loved, appealed to me. That was the last time Howard mentioned the plan, for future events upcountry squashed any more dreaming about the subject.

VIRL'S DECISION

De facto Chief Pilot Virl Black terminated his employment in February. Virl had been promoted to the billet in name only sometime after Abadie departed to work for Bob Rousselot in Taipei. Subordinate to Chief Operating Officer (COO) Jim Coble,

Virl was never compensated for his increased responsibilities and heavy workload attached to the job. Although puzzled, Abadie believed the reluctance to elevate Virl to a higher pay bracket stemmed from Black's mild, easy-going manner, and the VPFO's reservations that Virl could adequately implement difficult personnel decisions. The Knights knew Virl and his wife Ginna well, and found time to socialize with them. Although on home leave at the time of Black's decision to leave Udorn, Wayne did not recall any previous bitterness on Virl's part regarding receiving a line pilot pay scale. However, he noted that Ginna was quite unhappy with Udorn life, and her pressure on Virl more than likely had influenced his decision to leave.

Since Virl was universally well liked and respected, there was much regret, and no one in the pilot ranks wanted him to leave. The thankless job required a special individual, one with a good personality, able to deal with Taipei, Customers, and a highly diverse collection of pilots. To us, Virl fit the mold of necessary job requirements. Consequently, we all believed that his departure would present a disconcerting management void. Because of his prior influence with Abadie, we worried that the cocky and universally unpopular Bob Hitchman, whose increased presence around the CPH office was noted with suspicion, might receive the nod for the vacancy. As Virl had still not actually departed the position, we had to await future developments.⁸

Then an event occurred that might have had far-reaching implications in influencing the future CPH selection. The freewheeling Bob Hitchman was summoned by management to explain his actions on 27 January. On that day, he departed the airfield aboard 22-Golf, a Bird and Son twin engine Dornier, on an

⁸ CJ Abadie Email.
EW Knight Email.

operational mission upcountry. He went on the mission without authorization from Helicopter Chief Pilot Viril Black, Chief of Operations Jim Coble, or Project Manager Ben Moore. Furthermore, he accompanied the flight in direct violation of Company policy and verbal instructions issued by VPFO Rousselot and COO Jim Coble during the previous year. In his defense, Hitchman stated that he believed he could do whatever he liked during time off the flight schedule. He also alleged that he was doing the Company a favor by becoming cross-trained in other aircraft.

The COO reiterated various reasons why such flights were prohibited. Primary was the contractual indemnification in the case of accident or death. Bob was informed that he was not authorized to pilot any Company aircraft other than those in which he was qualified, assigned for flight duty, or those specified to deadhead as a passenger for the purpose of crew positioning or scheduled time off (STO) travel.

The official statement, placed in Hitchman's pilot file (P-file), indicated that if he failed to adhere to Company SOP, the COO would initiate unspecified corrective action. ⁹ ¹⁰

BURKE

Marius Burke's final area familiarization to satisfy the Captain upgrading requirement was achieved in southern Laos. To accomplish the prerequisite to attain exposure in all friendly regions of Laos, he rode with Captain Mike Marshall and Flight Mechanic Punzalan in the infamous Hotel-17 to a joint Embassy-Lao VIP celebration at the temple ruins of Wat Phu (later Site-

⁹ At the time, any distinction between CPH and COO titles was blurred, and not well understood among the line pilot group. We generally only referred to the Chief Pilot title.

¹⁰ Confidential Memorandum for the Record from COO James Coble concerning Bob Hitchman, 28 January 1964.

107) in Champassak Province, located downriver from Pakse. Afterward they ferried Ambassador Unger and his cohorts to another celebration in Pakse. Seeking the ambassador's future schedule, they went into town for further information. They eventually discovered Unger's male secretary, who was initially reluctant to provide an answer, until Marius threatened to make a direct query of the ambassador. The nervous aide first asked that they become inconspicuous, then later informed them that their services were no longer required.

Believing that they were returning to Udorn, the two jointly purchased a large case of Cino Algerian wine for an excellent price (alcohol was tax free in Pakse). Punz strapped the bulky carton to the centerline of the cargo compartment.

The following day, the ambassador, desiring to check road status along Route-13, changed his mind and boarded Hotel-17 with his entourage. However, much to Unger's displeasure, the wine box's size precluded one staff member from making the trip. They stopped along the road at Khone Sedone and La Pheng, and RON at Savannakhet.

The Route-13 laterite road was constantly under construction or repair between Savannakhet and Paksane. The artery was built in sections, so they landed at Seno and Na Kua to inspect the work, and then terminated for the night at Grove Jones, located on the road between Thakhet and Paksane. For years, French expatriates from the First Indochina War and Lao workers commercially mined a tin-laden area in the mountains east of the site, and owned by influential families. White Star had previously maintained a team at Grove Jones, but at this time, it was largely a highway construction site.

During the long trip, without any line of sight with Company radio stations, Mike found flight-following difficult. Therefore, unable to contact anyone, he transmitted in the

blind, hoping his reports would be received and relayed to Udorn. Many reports never got through the radio net, and embassy people in Vientiane were frantic because they were unaware of the ambassador's exact location for hours. Because of the enemy's success along border areas and movement toward Thakhet, there was heightened concern for Unger's safety during the RON at Grove Jones. Upon return to home base, Mike endured a stiff reproach from management over the trouble emanating from the failure to transmit required operations normal reports.

While dining at Grove Jones, Punzalan approached the pilots indicating that unless he had a large plate of rice for supper, he would be unable to work another day. Apparently, even though all hands enjoyed the steak fry, Punz's body craved rice. Marius managed to scrounge some for the carbohydrate-deprived Filipino.¹¹

After flying further north to Paksane, the ambassador and his people debarked to continue the rest of their inspection toward Vientiane by vehicle, and the crew of Hotel-17 departed for home.

The two pilots divided the case of wine. Burke saved his bottles for a special occasion. However, upon uncorking a bottle, he discovered it half full of sediment, and undrinkable. Mike and Kathy, not quite the same connoisseurs as Burke, thoroughly enjoyed the wine, despite the sediment. ¹²

¹¹ More than once, younger Flight Mechanics joked with me about white rice constituting the Filipino sandwich.

¹² Mike Marshall Letter.
Marius Burke Emails, 12/17/99, 12/18/99.
Marius Burke Interview.

Unknown to us, USG plans and programs for Southeast Asia went forward in a cause-and-effect process that fostered far reaching consequences for helicopter operations and crews. Utilizing the OPLAN-34 concept, covert operations began against North Vietnam. ¹ The plan included an expanded phase of clandestine military operations against the North in an attempt to persuade North Vietnamese leaders to order a halt to guerrilla operations in South Vietnam and Laos. Formulated in Saigon by CIA and MACV planners, the plan was forwarded to the Secretary of Defense in December 1963, and was eventually approved by President Johnson. Following "Switchback," and now strictly controlled by the U.S. military in Saigon, the plan differed from previously unsuccessful CIA-managed covert operations. A portion of the plan included bombing North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao troops in Laos by U.S. and Thai pilots flying RLAF-marked planes, controlled by the Lao Ambassador.

To assist in implementation of OPLAN-34 objectives, MACV-SOG, or the Saigon MACV Studies and Observation Group, was formed as a special office of covert activities. The unconventional warfare group, named SOG, was tasked with executing an intensified program of harassment, diversion, political pressure, capture of prisoners, physical destruction, intelligence collection, and propaganda against North Vietnam or its troops in Laos. Each action required prior approval from the Secretaries of State, Defense, and the White House. ²

¹ OPLAN: Operations Plan.

² Jacob Van Staaveren, 30.

Despite the drought of upcountry flying, depending on the availability of ships forthcoming from the Maintenance Department, Operations managed to provide enough aircraft to satisfy pilot training requirements.

On the third, I was scheduled for a one-hour night proficiency hop with former Marine Corps officer Sam Jordan and Ben Naval in Hotel-17. While still in the Crotch with the Third Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU), I had met Jordan during a beer fest at the house that he, Wayne, and Jerry Souders rented before Jerry's wife arrived. At the time, flying was heavy and the men had not learned much about each other. However, Wayne did note that Sam was one of the most frugal persons in the organization.

It was the first time the scheduling folks provided an opportunity for me to fly with Jordan. Despite his noticeable introvert tendencies, I liked the man, while others observed uncommon mannerisms. Mainly, Sam shuffled his feet and seemed uncomfortable making eye contact during conversation. Occasionally, while talking he would sniff, curl his lip, and create a face that looked like someone inhaling an offensive odor. His nervousness seemed a strange characteristic for someone who had worked a short time for such a staid organization as International Business Machines (IBM). In my estimation, his excellent bearing and soft-spoken southern manner presented a logical choice to fit the IBM mold. ³

Like a few other crewmembers at the time, Sam married a local girl. In the early days, both Wassana and her sister worked at the former Marine snack bar. Without much bitterness, Sam indicated that an unnamed pilot had raped her. I suppose

³ To this day, I am not sure I would have cut the mustard with the company had I elected to accept a job offer by the IBM interviewer at Duke University.

this was possible, but I said nothing at the time. However, aware of the general Thai proclivity for, and the liberal attitude toward sex, I found it difficult to comprehend that any mature Thai girl working for and associated with Americans could assert that she was raped. ⁴

Wayne Knight and his family returned from home leave. During the first week of February, with Jerry McEntee no longer available to share the management workload, Wayne returned to a full slate of test flight and training duties. He flew locally with Viri Black, Elmer Munsell, Don Buxton, Jim Coble, Mike Marshall, and Marius Burke incorporating combined proficiency flights and test flight procedures. The separate portions were not specified, and the flights were billed to the Customer.

With Viri leaving Air America shortly, by default Wayne also assumed that more upcountry training assignments would be forthcoming. Since he was not being paid extra for his management duties, he still RON and flew the line, but at the same time, performed route checks that constituted little more than mountain proficiency checks. It was also an excellent opportunity to observe and report on current living conditions, upcountry operations, and to converse with the Customer regarding pilots' performance or other outstanding problems.

Knight, Jordon, and "Blackie" Mondello crewed Hotel-13 to Sam Tong on the Seventh. Long Tieng was still logged interchangeably as Victor Site-30, Victor Site-98, or Victor Site-20A (VS-30, VS-98, VS-20A), or was simply called "The Alternate." Perhaps there was method in this confusion, as the terminology could be bewildering to individuals not knowledgeable regarding the sensitive site's purpose, but not to

⁴ Perhaps knowledge of this event provided Ben Moore's incentive for initially hiring only male waiters for the Club.

us. One flight took the trio to Ban Hin Tang, a small village in a lush valley east of Sam Tong. Located below the towering heights of Padong Ridge, close to the southern Plain of Jars, and two miles southeast of Tha Tam Bleung (VS-72), the area served as a future checkpoint to the Plain of Jar's "back door," and a listening post for any attempted enemy movement toward Long Tieng. Much of the time, a Catholic priest, Father Jean Wauthier, ministered to the Lao Theung needs at Ban Hin Tang. ⁵

Perhaps in deference to Howard's and my long, enforced stint as First Officers, or lessened need for line Captains, Marius Burke also spent several months as a First Officer. Many negative factors still played a part in our operation, and rumors abounded regarding the fate of our Company. For obvious reasons, the communists and their adherents wanted us out of Laos. Periodically, the leftists pointed to our U.S. Marine Corps bailed green helicopters, and complained about our paramilitary involvement in the conflict. Even the Company name produced negative overtones. If the clamor became too loud, the politicians stepped in and uttered pacifying statements concerning the introduction of new, less contentious outfits to replace Air America.

FIRED...?

Other rumors purported that our helicopter operation would be severely cut back, which was amusing, for pilots were already flying no more than thirty hours per month. Another unverified report indicated that additional pilots would be terminated. It was easy to be paranoid regarding such a rumor. I had managed to survive this long amid the numerous threats of firing.

⁵ EW Knight Email, 03/23/01.
Fred Benson Interview with Father Lucien Brouhard, 12/11/13, 9.

Therefore, the recent rumor did not unduly concern me until the ever-dangerous man-eater, Diane Elder, approached me on the walkway between the Club and Operations. Without providing details, she confidentially whispered that I was going to be fired. I had no idea what prompted her to say this, but I was incensed that such information would come from her, and not from local management.

In the capacity of Club Manager, Dick Elder had Ben Moore's ear. Therefore, I assumed that he might have heard some discussion regarding the subject and told his wife, or she had heard it in passing. I was hot when I entered Ben's office, and angrily demanded to know if what Diane indicated was true. If so, why did this information come from her, and not someone more qualified to deal with it. Ben soon calmed me down and, with a straight face, assured me that I was not being fired. Apparently, Diane, one of the meaner spirited wives with nothing more useful to do with their lives, sometimes for fun, stirred the pot. With Ben's guarantee that I was not being terminated, I departed the Base Manager's office somewhat relieved, but was still concerned over the half-truths that prevailed in the many facets of our lives.

Following a local proficiency check on the sixth, and pending a satisfactory upcountry Route Check, Viril Black upgraded Marius Burke to a provisional Captain. In contrast to the scatter method used in the past by Abadie and Coble in assigning pilots with First Officers, this procedure marked future check-out methodology. Once a trainee received familiarization in all regions of Laos as second-in-command, he was scheduled for a proficiency check in the local airfield pattern. Upon successful completion of this flight, the CPH scheduled the individual for an upcountry check ride with a Company-qualified pilot. If acceptable, he was then promoted to

temporary Captain, and his pay increased by four hundred dollars per month.

Marius departed for upcountry with Wayne on the ninth to complete his final upgrading. They switched to Hotel-14 from Hotel-13 late in the day to accomplish a short flight. Then, along with Flight Mechanic Stan Wilson, they flew together for two days. They worked in the Padong area, and conducted one flight to Pha Peung (VS-21), a site located on the east side of lofty 8,500-foot Phou Sao north of Tha Vieng. ⁶

UPCOUNTRY

Scheduled to relieve Wayne in Hotel-14 and fly with Marius, I deadheaded to Vientiane on a C-123 flown by well-known Captain "Shower Shoes" Art Wilson. Art, a colorful character and a legend in his own time, appeared a run-of-the-mill person, but was far from an ordinary human. Although frowned upon by Taipei, but normally overlooked by local management, Art displayed a penchant to fly wearing his beloved flip-flop shower clogs. There were several stories and theories circulating regarding the reason for this seemingly illogical behavior. One questionable tale was that after being forced down, he had walked out of China wearing shower shoes. The other slightly more credible account indicated that in 1960 he had performed a successful forced landing north of Vientiane in an H-19A helicopter, and walked a substantial distance to a road, where he thumbed a ride south. Art insisted that he never would have been successful without his preferred footwear. I agreed with his choice of footwear, but not while flying. In the humid Southeast Asian climate, flip-flops afforded a radiator type effect that exposed one's feet and tended to cool the entire

⁶ EW Knight Emails, 03/23/01, 03/25/01, 03/26/01.

body. I first learned about feet and heat dissipation from a Ryukyuan honey while hot-tubbing in Okinawa. In addition, the footwear was easy to remove at the front door Thai style when entering a house. Further enhancing their endorsement, utility, and notoriety, a great many tough North Vietnamese fighters wore flops manufactured from discarded automobile tires and rope that everyone called "Ho Chi Minh Sandals."

As there was adequate time before my next flight, and I had not been upcountry for a month, I took the opportunity to check in with the good folks at the Flight Information Center (FIC) for an area briefing. The FIC replaced the old somewhat uncomfortable and intimidating briefings conducted by an Agency Air Operation's Customer representative, or the Operations Manager in the past, and was developed as a direct result of the loss of the C-46 and crew in September. The system was a relatively new concept, and as pilots actually provided the most current information available regarding the war, although not mandatory, we were encouraged to participate when able. After exchanging pleasantries with Bill Solin, who indicated that he and Jim Mullen were progressing well with the Company-mandated project, we moved to the large situation map attached to the wall. While Bill talked and pointed, I noted a reasonably static situation plotted in my general area of operation within Military Region Two.

As with anything unfamiliar and unproven, I was a little pessimistic about the system at first and wondered how these fellows could possibly stay on top of the action, when, in many cases, the Customer barely managed to remain abreast of the fluid situation. Moreover, the present dry season encompassed a period when enemy movement was fluid, and offensive action rapidly changed the odds for ground pounders and us pilots. Still, because of Solin and Mullen's infectious enthusiasm, I

gave them both the benefit of doubt, and was pleasantly surprised when FIC eventually developed into a first class Theater information center. Their intelligence information, coupled with what I learned upcountry, helped keep me aware of situations and pertinent information that might have otherwise been ignored, overlooked, or purposely withheld.

Helio Courier Captain Rick Byrne, flying B-857, delivered me to Sam Tong late in the day. When Wayne returned to Site-20 and turned the ship over to me, it was too late for further flights. Lacking transportation south, he was obligated to RON another night in the dirty, rat infested hut. Saving us from rare mosquitoes, and particularly potential rat bites, nets had been rigged on vertical poles attached to the four corners of the cots. The system worked for those who took advantage of it. We shared the two warm cans of beer I carried in my luggage.

Wayne caught a ride south to Wattay Airport, and then rode the return milk run to Udorn with "Red" Fredrick on C-47 B-827. Later, he trained in disused B-803, the Chinese registered Bell helicopter 47G-2, with Billy Zeitler, and flew training and test flights until leaving for Taipei on the 28th. He remained at the head shed more than a week receiving briefings from the VPFO on possible management upgrading, visiting with Abadie, attending Chinese ATP classes, and taking the examination. ⁷

With Marius as my cockpit mate for the day, to enable him additional area exposure before flying by himself, we were assigned to work for the Long Tieng Customer. We began shuttles to the east, where action was fast escalating. After Ban Pak

⁷ EW Knight-Emails, 03/23/01, 03/25/01, 03/26/01.

Leung fell on 11 February, FAR unit, battalions of Group Mobile-13, regrouped south of Xieng Khouang Ville. ⁸ ⁹

Throughout the day, we supplied elevated positions on Phou Sao and Phou Khe with "hard rice": small arms ammunition and grenades. During shuttles, it appeared to me that the troops were preparing to counter impending offensive actions. Since reinforcing Phou Khe, the site had become a giant thorn in the enemy's side, for it presented a tactical position from which our people sporadically shelled the Xieng Khouang Ville area, and periodically sent patrols into the valley to harass and keep the Pathet Lao off balance. Now, according to Agency reports, four battalions--approximately 400 men per unit--consisting of enemy professionals, were preparing to cross the border and reinforce the Pathet Lao in Military Region Two. I heard on Voice of America radio that an inflated number of nine battalions was involved, but preferred to believe the former. With the balance of power tipping toward enemy forces, the enemy would certainly roll over positions the FAR had fought so hard to obtain. If not countered, it appeared that they would soon be poised to push us back to Padong (VS-05), Pha Phai (VS-65), or even Pha Khao (VS-14), the original positions we held when I first began working at Long Tieng.

Unfortunately, I was not privy to an abbreviated Special National Intelligence Estimate stating that there had been an increase in direct North Vietnamese participation in recent Pathet Lao military activities, and there were indications that the participation would continue. The fact that no sharp U.S.

⁸ Located seven miles southwest of Xieng Khouang Ville, I had supplied Pak Lueng in November.

⁹ CIA Intelligence Information Cable, 02/27/64.

reaction had occurred in the face of recent communist advances may have emboldened the Pathet Lao and Vietnamese leaders. ¹⁰

The next two days involved maximum flying while supplying VS-19 and the VS-21 areas by myself. One small hilltop position on the forward west side of soaring Phou Sao was manned by what looked like youngsters and one elderly man. When gramp's head popped out of the fighting hole, he appeared skinny, withered, and ancient. As in the past, I continued to carry substantial loads into Phou Khe. Overloading the helicopter commensurate with my fuel load and capability, I rolled and bounced down the grassy strip at Padong until achieving the feel and necessary lift to jerk the ship into the air. The technique did not characterize the gentlest aircraft treatment, but it worked. In addition, decent loads were expected of us by the Customer and preferred by my peers.

On the fourteenth I discovered that the Phou Sao outpost, where I had spent an inordinate amount of time shuttling hundreds of pounds of mixed ammunition, had fallen early that morning without a shot being fired. Probably noting my activity, the enemy merely radioed over a friendly radio frequency that they were going to attack the outpost. Consequently, the pathetically few Meo "defenders" there withdrew to a safer location. I was surprised. It marked the first time I realized that the Meo, although outstanding in conducting guerrilla offensive actions, were not especially adept in maintaining defensive positions.

Additionally, at this phase in the war, like Lao troops, most Meo were terrified of the dreaded Vietnamese warriors. Never having captured one, they believed that the fierce

¹⁰ CIA SNIE 50-64, Short-Term Prospects in Southeast Asia, 02/12/64.

fighters were nine-foot tall super humans. They may not have been giants, but, equipped with excellent rapid-fire Soviet AK-47 assault rifles, they admittedly possessed superior weapons. However, the steep commanding heights occupied by the Meo, and the grenades I had hauled there, should have negated much, if not all of this advantage. Considering the amount of money expended in helicopter support and ordnance pillaged during the non-action, caused me considerable visceral distress. Aware that the enemy would use the culled bullets and explosives against us during future attacks of their choosing made me even angrier. Upon receiving word that the enemy had departed the site, and the original troops were again their holes, the Padong loadmaster wanted me to shuttle more ammunition to the position. I complied with the order, as I was there to serve, not question, but I sorely resented the fact that the ammo lost to the enemy represented a most handsome salary.

During a refueling stop at The Alternate, I vented my emotions to Vint concerning the Meo reluctance to fight for the position, and in effect supply the enemy with the means to prosecute the war. I already had an inkling of Pop's and Tony's bias concerning State Department attempts to adhere to Geneva Accords protocols and restrict fighting and government gains. To me, this strategy smacked of the failed Korean policy of the early 1950s. What the "beard" calmly said next surprised and shocked me. It opened my eyes to the actual USG concept of conducting a limited Lao war. From previous discussions, I already knew about the blocking action and the Lao buffer provided for South Vietnam and Thailand, until the neighboring countries could develop their forces and exist on their own. However, Vint allowed that because of the small number of Vang Pao's field troops available to him, compared to those of a stronger enemy, it was Agency policy that when pressed, the

troops were instructed to withdraw and live to fight another day. His frank explanation helped me to better understand current USG philosophy and my position in the scheme. However, as a former Marine, indoctrinated in aggressiveness and a will to win, I still found it difficult to fathom or accept why I would be again instructed to supply a position directly after it had been picked clean. It was sort of like receiving a present for losing. As Lao expatriates and American workers paraphrased Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* when attempting to make sense regarding events in Laos, things got curiouser and curiouser.

Also confusing the issue at the time was Tony's belligerent war-like posture that contrasted with the State Department position. A good Marine, he craved offensive as opposed to defensive operations, and he privately cursed Vang Pao and his troops for dragging their feet during operations. His attitude conflicted so much with the embassy's, that I wondered at his desire to remain in the Theater, but where else would an old war horse, who overtly flaunted his dissatisfaction with authority, find work? Perhaps his unhappiness with principals representing friendly participants was the prime reason for his excessive drinking. Taking solace in booze was an ultimate rationalization to relieve his frustration, the only accepted civilized method he could employ to resolve USG's conduct of the war.

On one trip, I carried fuel drums to Padong to eliminate the Long Tieng refueling flights and devote more time to area shuttles. Later in the day, with my fuel state low, Vint arrived in a Helio Courier and abruptly ordered me to remove all the artillery pieces from Phu Khe. What? This was a surprising development. He stated that his superiors expected a large battle for the site soon, and Vientiane did not want to lose the guns. The timing could not have been worse, for I had shuttled

many artillery rounds fifteen miles to the site over the past few days. However, that was not my problem, and perhaps the gunners could expend some of the shells while I started returning the guns to Padong. To lighten Hotel-14, I had Wilson strip every non-essential item from the cabin section and we departed toward Phou Khe.

Fortunately, someone had already removed the unwieldy Soviet 85mm Long Tom. Except for that unique artillery piece, slinging the guns into the site had been relatively easy; removing them would definitely present an unknown quantity, one in which I had no previous experience. After breaking a gun down, several troopers, looking much like a Keystone Cops movie comedy, manhandled a 105mm barrel into the cabin section. Then, using maximum allowable power, I turned 180 degrees and inched my way toward the lip of the 6,200-foot pad. There I patiently waited for a breeze or chance updraft to provide sufficient aerodynamic lift to depart. Clearing the pad, I dove to attain the characteristic jolt associated with translational lift, followed by precious flying speed. After a short trip to Padong, I returned for the second 105 tube.

Although bulky, the howitzer gun barrels were relatively easy to load and carry, but each attempt to lift the first 2,000-pound gun carriage resulted in failure. Even after appreciably shortening the sling to take better advantage of the downwash ground cushion (called ground effect), the carriage would not budge off the ground. After experimenting with the untried trial and error field operation, I requested that the Thai Army artillery specialist in charge remove the large wheels and reduce weight. As this was a simple process, he complied and the method worked. However, the operation still bordered on a marginal power vs. lift-weight capability for the Sikorsky helicopter: a machine never designed or intended to

carry such a heavy out-of-ground-effect load at a high altitude.¹¹

With Stan monitoring and centering my position over the load, after hookup I barely managed to raise the load a few inches off the ground. Then I cautiously inched forward to the lip of the site and the drop-off of several hundred feet. From this position, with the aid of a favorable wind gust, I took off and proceeded slowly across the valley. One more carriage lift and another load of four wheels completed the job.

Despite the stress and corresponding fatigue plaguing my body, I considered the work I had done that day highly satisfying and worthwhile. Ironically, this phase of the Phu Khe operation had achieved a full cycle for me. I had been fortunate enough to participate in both the insertion and removal of the artillery guns. However, as a former Marine who found it difficult to condone any kind of defeat, I was confused about our participation in the war. Despite Vint's logical explanation as to established policy, I still found it difficult to fully understand or accept a pullback and departure from advantaged positions without a fight. Of course, I was unaware of Washington's rear echelon policies, which in deference to the Geneva Accords, constrained Ambassador Unger to encourage and support only minimal RLG gains or holding actions. I wondered how a war that dealt in men's blood, quite possibly mine, could be conducted from the U.S. or even Vientiane. Yes, I was becoming more deeply involved in the conflict and, without fully realizing it at the time, loved it.

¹¹ Because of operational requirements and lack of parameters, we never utilized flight manual performance charts to calculate aircraft capability. Had we done so, work for the Customer never would have been accomplished.

Tony Poe was a H-34 pilot's dream come true. In contrast to Vint's conservative cost-conscious attitude, the burly field agent's philosophy was to keep our rotors turning so we could earn a little extra money for our upcountry efforts. This was good for both parties, and certainly endeared us to the man. He was cagey though, for in turn, his perceived generosity squeezed considerably more work out of us. Toward the end of the day, if insufficient time or daylight remained for another round trip to a site, he dispatched us to Sam Tong to load or sling airdropped fuel drums from the drop zone below the site to a designated spot beside the strip. Sometimes this resulted in an extra hour flight time. In the days before the Site-20 strip was improved and larger fixed wing crews could safely land with fuel drums, the precious commodity was dropped into a lower area below and east of the complex. Hauling drums was non-challenging, safe work. After an otherwise demanding day, we could work up to or even a little after dark. The nature of the work was also time-consuming, for a ground handling man was required to apply a strap to the 350-pound drum so it could be slowly hoisted to the cabin section. Operating with a light fuel load, I could easily fly three to four drums to our refueling pit. However, there were those who always found a way to take advantage of a situation. Mike Marshall indicated that Bob Hitchman only carried one drum per trip to make the job last longer. ¹²

Early on, empty drums were recycled to Vientiane or Udorn for shipment to the Bangkok supplier. Carrying loads of empty drums south was particularly interesting for fixed wing crewmembers, when they began to snap, crackle, and pop like Rice Crispies when climbing to altitude. In Bangkok, the barrels were steam cleaned, refilled, trucked to the border on Thai

¹² Mike Marshall Letter.

government cartel vehicles, and flown back upcountry. Over time, the recycling proved a very costly process until some wise, cost-counting soul decided to terminate it. Since nothing was wasted in the mountains, the natives used discarded drums to good advantage. They were used for rain barrels, or sliced open and pounded flat to become sides of buildings. Artisans cleverly shaped tops into curved cooking woks. Much later, open-ended barrels were welded together creating road culverts for the Sam Tong Long Tieng road over Skyline Ridge.

PARTY

That evening Blaine Jensen invited us to a Black Tai (Tai Dam) New Year celebration in the small refugee village across the runway. ¹³ After flying over twenty-six hours in three days, I was slated to be relieved, so I eagerly anticipated attending the native party and eating local food. Stars twinkled brightly overhead, but shed only minimal light in the valley as Blaine, Stan, Tom Ward, and I ambled across the dusty strip with the aid of a single flashlight. Then we made our way down a narrow path to the Baccam residence.

The war had thrown diverse groups of people together at Sam Tong. As the communists pushed additional populations south, Lao Theung lowlanders, Black Tai, and majority Meo clans were more or less forced to associate with each other. Depending on ethnic origin and arrival in the valley, commensurate with the war's intensity, the small cluster of huts and people increased proportionately. As victims of the same adversity, to the uninitiated, all appeared to live together in harmony. With the advent of time, for the first time, cultures and gene pools

¹³ To keep the peace, in a very large area, different ethnic groups or clans generally split up into separate areas at the Sam Tong refugee complex.



Air America Helio Courier Captain Al Rich, IVS representatives Pop Buell, and Tom Ward discussing the intricacies of the aircraft at Sam Tong.

necessarily merged in a country where suspicion of one's neighbor had previously been the norm.

Inl "Joe" Baccam and his mother were the only Black Tai at Sam Tong from the North Vietnam border area. Joe's father had died from an illness when he was very young. Therefore, to make ends meet, Joe, an only child, and his mother maintained a small store and coffee shop. In addition, because Joe spoke decent English and needed to support his mom, Pop hired him to attend to warehouse details, talk to the people, and supervise loading and aircraft dispatch duties. ¹⁴

We must have been a little late, for Pop, Tong Sar, and Nai Kong, Bleu Vu, were already seated at the communal split bamboo table. Scrapped H-34 rotor blades, scrounged from a prior accident, formed acceptable bench seats. The Lao-Lao flowed, but to Pop's consternation, I could not get the extremely strong corn whiskey past my lips. Instead I accepted a luke-warm Japanese beer. Dressed in new traditional black pajama-like clothes common to the hill people, Joe, his mother, and others acted as hosts and waiters. The addition of our presence enlivened the party and stimulated conversation, toasts, and good cheer. I was hungry by the time food was served and chose the most identifiable course: noodles. After another beer or two, my dehydrated body responded positively. Then a tray arrived that caught my eye. It contained blobs of a dark black substance. Someone informed me that the unfamiliar strange lumps were congealed pig blood sausage. Indeed, the shimmering mess looked much like dark Jell-O. Without considering the consequences, believing everything was well cooked or steamed, I placed two pieces on my plate. It was good, and the gore went down easily, especially when chased with delicious Asahi beer.

¹⁴ Blaine Jensen Letter, 04/29/96.

The party was a rousing success. After dinner, we paid our respects to our hosts and sauntered out into the blackness that only nights in the mountains can produce. When our eyes adjusted somewhat, we stumbled back toward the warehouse. Once inside, Pop took a final swig from a partially filled bottle of mountain juice he had carried from the Baccam house. Producing a pained face and pursing his lips, he indicated in his colloquial manner that the brew was excellent, but it *"chapped his lips."* Recognizing that Pop was only a mere mortal, and feeling more comfortable talking to him at that moment, I asked the little guy how he could drink so much of the potent booze. He indicated it was no problem, as he was used to it, adding that the really *"good stuff, usually with a herb floating in the bottle, came from Houa Moung (VS-58) deep in the bowels of Sam Neua Province."* I had heard there was a hot springs located below the site, but never discovered whether that special water, or a master brewer, was responsible for the vintage liquor.

Early the following morning all euphoria of the night's festivities had worn off. I was deathly ill and knew I was about to die. Between vomiting spells and the "Code of the East," I caught Pop before he departed for an outlying site. Convincing me that I would not expire, he laughed, opened an old kerosene refrigerator that Jiggs Weldon had provided, and withdrew a pint bottle of penicillin liquid. Shoving it into my hand, he indicated that the medication should stop or slow my problem. Hoping for a merciful demise, dubious about ever being cured, I began sipping the medicine. Two hours later, between bouts of sickness, after which I chugged from the bottle, I held a "dead soldier" in my hand. I could not believe I had consumed the entire bottle during that period. It was not much fun being sick upcountry. Besides feeling miserable, everyone was off working, leaving no one with whom to converse or sympathize with my

condition. The medicine finally did provide relief, and my stomach and intestines were nearly back to normal by the time I departed Sam Tong. It was the last time I suffered from such a malady while upcountry.

I caught an early ride to Vientiane on Papa Bravo Juliet (PBJ), a Bird & Son Dornier (DO-28 A-1). I checked into FIC with the latest information from the Long Tieng Customer and observations during my stint in Military Region Two. Solin was pleased to obtain any information he could. While waiting for the first available transportation to Udorn, I visited the medical clinic for additional stomach and intestinal medication to further calm my nasty "Code of the East," and cashed a check at the embassy commissary for 200 dollars. Then I repaired to the Chinese-operated gedunk where I talked to several fixed wing crews. Except during deadheading periods, I rarely had an opportunity to chat with these folks about work and the Company's future prospects. Late in the day, while en route to Udorn, the crew of Hotel-14 came by to pick me up. By then, I was feeling almost human again.

As I rode home, reasonably certain my month in the saddle was nearly complete except for a test flight or two, I wondered if the flight time would ever increase. With the war heating up again, and terminating pilots not being replaced, it seemed likely.

PERSONNEL

At this time the H-34 Udorn helicopter line pilot inventory comprised nineteen souls: Marius Burke, Don Buxton, Dick Casterlin, Jack Connor, Bill Cook, Dick Crafts, Dick Elder, Howard Estes, Bob Hitchman, Sam Jordon, Julian "Scratch" Kanach, Wayne Knight, Mike Marshall, Tom Moher, Elmer Munsell, Bill Pearson, Ed Reid, Charles Weitz, and Bill Zeitler. Jim Coble

rarely flew outside the confines of Udorn. However, there were still the issues of too few aircraft to fly, and always unscheduled maintenance with which to contend. I had just learned in Vientiane that airplane pilots, in contrast to our program, continued to earn a fat 2,000 dollars per month since the slowdown. This prompted me to consider that I should have attempted to get into their line of work. My original goal had not changed appreciably, and I was still intent on accumulating wealth. No one planned to remain in Southeast Asia for a long period--perhaps only fulfilling the three-year commitment. Life in our backwater area was a grind. The existence continued to be hot, boring, intellectually sterile, and I personally had been sick frequently. True, with the advent of the Club and new pool, our lifestyle slowly improved, but few individuals lost sight of the primary motive for Air America employment: to earn and accrue sufficient funds, to provide a feedstock to accomplish future goals.

If cut-back rumors, firings, and Company changes were not enough to worry us, we learned that Tennessee Senator Albert Gore, the Congressional anathema of the overseas worker, had proposed yet another change to the tax exemption law that would effectively reduce or entirely eliminate our cherished overseas tax exemption. Considered a pet project, Gore introduced a new bill yearly, or periodically tacked it onto another proposal. In addition to being one of the smallest constituencies relative to the entire American population, overseas workers had virtually no Washington lobby. Therefore, the group was an easy target for politicians hoping to obtain voter acclaim with tax agendas.

It was an imprudent policy, for no other country in the world taxed their overseas workers. Before the Kennedy presidency, people living and working outside the USA paid no taxes. After assuming office, the President had Congress limit

tax exemptions to 35,000 dollars. By the time I arrived in Southeast Asia, that amount had been further reduced. We currently enjoyed a yearly 20,000 dollar exemption for physical presence, and 25,000 dollars for a bona fide residence. Supposedly, the current law was implemented to curtail past tax abuses by expatriate movie stars who claimed a foreign residence.

Senator Gore's proposed law did not make sense to the normal individual. We did not represent ultra-rich movie stars lounging in the comfort of expensive villas on the French Riviera while avoiding taxes. Moreover, we gave up many standard creature comforts to live in undeveloped countries. In addition, we risked our health and necks while implementing USG policy.

It appeared that in the past few years, some in the government had done their utmost to squelch the little man and make life miserable for him. Naturally, we were bitter, and agreed that it would not be worthwhile to remain overseas without a substantial tax benefit. Any change in the law would constitute a blunder on our government's part, for there would be an exodus of many good people. For relatively few dollars, USG would ultimately suffer, as the cost of future contracts would certainly escalate.

POOL ISSUES

While I was working upcountry, the cement floor of the pool was poured and curing. After resuming work on the project, I lifted something, strained my back, and had to cease work for a few days. I watched as laborers erected forms and steel for the sides. Like on the floor, heavy steel re-bar was used. However, instead of wiring the steel together, it was decided to weld all joints on the boxed joints for greater strength. This task was



Photo taken from a Company H-34 displaying a broad overhead view of the 1964 Air America facility with the pool floor poured. Clockwise from top: Club movie and dining room combination, pool, Administration-Operations building, supply, supermarket, fire support, POL. Hangars to the lower right are not visible. The Madriver drainage ditch flows along the perimeter of Air America and the parking-taxi ramp.

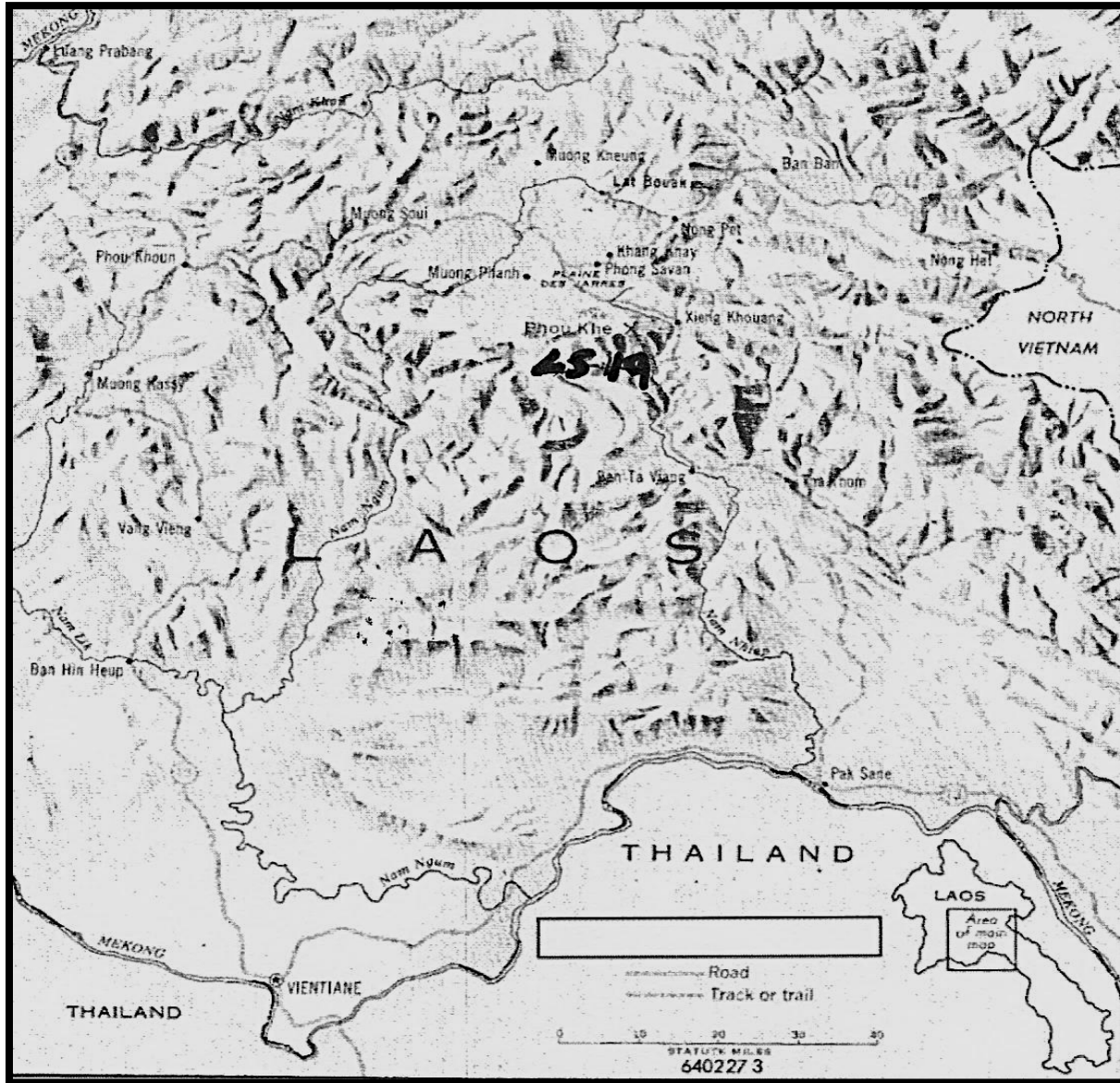
Abadie Collection.

delegated to an American ground mechanic and me. Over a two-week period, he welded while I ensured that the rods tightly contacted each other. Working in that steel and concrete pit was the closest I could describe as hell. To minimize the effects of a natural heat sink, we rigged parachute canopies to shield us from the intense sunlight beating down and reflecting off the concrete. As we diligently and systematically welded bar after bar, Elder thoughtfully kept pitchers of lemonade coming to replace our loss of body fluids. However, with no breezes reaching us in the deep hole, we still baked during mid-day. With Ben Moore's encouragement, frequent breaks in the air-conditioned Club, and perseverance, we accomplished the last weld. Then, with sixty-five percent of the pool completed, we took a much needed break, while laborers finished the interior framing in anticipation of a final pour. One could only appreciate that what had been a dirty rainwater-filled hole a few months before, now almost looked like a swimming pool.

Vint Lawrence was correct. He, or whoever made the decision to remove all the guns from Phu Khe, was indeed prudent. The day I departed for Udorn, a substantial number of communist troops began moving from the Plain of Jars toward Nong Het. Their goal was to contest Meo guerrilla raids near the North Vietnamese border from along the heights overlooking Route-7. Offensive feints, depending on varying numbers of men available at any time, would become a vintage Vang Pao trademark. When unduly pressured in one area, hoping to divert enemy attention, he brilliantly attempted to create havoc in another. In this case, the strategy temporarily worked, and by the eighteenth, enemy strength and pressure was greatly diminished in the Xieng Khouang Ville area.

By the third week of February, the situation reversed, with an infusion of four Vietnamese battalions--an estimated 1,200 troops--into the Nong Het area. Over the next four days, observers in the mountains on the edge of the Plain of Jars spotted heavy vehicular traffic moving eastward toward the Ban Ban Valley. Still the dry season, with mountain roads in passable condition, another fifty vehicle convey was observed rolling on Route-7 with four of the trucks towing 105mm howitzers. Meo strike teams wisely avoided contact with the large influx of enemy.

With Meo raids contained or greatly diminished, speculation correctly predicted enemy troops returning to the Plain of Jars and subsequent deployment to the Xieng Khouang area.



Located high in the hills, government controlled Phu Khe (LS-19) overlooked the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley to the north, and provided a base for harassment of Route-4 until its loss on 25 February 1964.

02/28/64 Central Intelligence Bulletin Map.

During the early hours of 25 February, enemy units struck Phu Khe in force. ¹ Under the protection of massed artillery and mortar fire from the Ville, they launched a flanking movement from both the southeast and northeast, to reclaim total control of Route-4 between Khang Khay and Xieng Khouang Ville. By noon, without artillery to employ counterfire, and the enemy commencing bombardment from Dong Danh with additional heavy weapons, the situation for the Phu Khe defenders appeared extremely bleak. With FAR troops unable or unwilling to move forward from a defensive line three miles south to reinforce beleaguered sites, enemy attacks reduced Meo positions on the east side of the seven-mile-wide massif to only one. As the east side of the hills was largely neutralized, other friendly positions fell one by one until the short helicopter landing strip was threatened. Unable to re-supply or reinforce outposts, by 2000 hours, after a coordinated attack by four enemy columns, the last Meo position fell on the west side.

At the time of the enemy offensive, the FAN Third Parachute Battalion was located at Ban Boua and Phou Theneng on the Plain of Jars southwest edge. These overlooked the west throat of the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley, six miles west of Phu Khe. This was close to the area where Hitchman and I had lifted two components of the Soviet 85mm gun to Phu Khe in December. Since the unit was exposed by the loss of Phu Khe, Vang Pao planned to extend his defense line on high ground near Ban May and attempt to link up with this element. As long as the two FAR battalions located at Sen Louang, eleven miles south of Xieng Khouang Ville, remained in place, they blocked potential enemy thrusts south along Route-4 toward Ban Tha Vieng, Tha Thom, and Paksane.

¹ CIA Daily Brief, 02/28/64. The action occurred a day after representatives of the rightist, neutralist, and Pathet Lao factions met in Vientiane to plan for a Plain des Jarres 'summit' meeting.

General Kham Khorn's troops were positioned in strength to defend against enemy advances toward Tha Thom or south to Paksane. In order to support Sen Louang units, a H-34 pilot positioned a 75mm howitzer on the high ground at Pha Peung (VS-21).

In after action reports, Vang Pao alleged that increased enemy artillery barrages were the primary reason for the loss of Phu Khe. He further doubted that the enemy could maintain a large force on the mountain indefinitely because of difficult re-supply issues. Moreover, lack of sufficient transport would likely prevent the enemy from moving further south on Route-4. He believed the enemy would consolidate gains at Xieng Khouang Ville and along the logistic artery from the Plain of Jars. Then, before the rains commenced, they would attempt to eliminate annoying Meo elements remaining around the Tha Lin Noi (VS-18) and Phou Nong areas. To counter this projected enemy plan and strengthen the Meo in the hilly Nong Het area adjacent to Route-7, the General intended to move Groupe Mobile-13's men from Pha Pheung to the Tha Lin Noi and Phou Nong sites. In addition to reinforcing Meo forces there, the FAR would assist road interdiction operations to help prevent Kong Le's Neutralists from being ejected from the Plain. ²

CIA analysts surmised:

"Ultimate communist military intentions in this area are unclear, but one immediate objective apparently was to gain full control over the supply route to Xieng Khouang town via Route-4, which was within range of Meo mortars on Phu Khe.

² CIA Intelligence Information Cable, 02/27/64.

*Control of Phou Khe would also facilitate a move against Kong Le's headquarters at Moung Phanh should the communists wish to undertake such a major action..."*³

WASHINGTON

Annoyed by communist gains in Military Region Three, unsettling threats to the Thakhet border town, and increased use of North Vietnamese Army regulars--still referred to in official messages as Viet Minh--on the Plain of Jars, high-level Washington planners sought acceptable countering initiatives throughout February. Super-hawk Assistant Secretary of State for Far East Affairs Roger Hilsman pushed hard to once again introduce a Marine unit to Thailand. Because of communist advances in Laos and the deteriorating situation in South Vietnam, he believed such a move would send a stern message to North Vietnam and China of USG resolve to defend its Southeast Asian policy. He also recommended an extensive program of political, military, and covert action to aid the Lao government.

In an extraordinarily cogent secret message to the Secretary of State during mid-February, Roger Hilsman wrote:

"The Pathet Lao--unquestionably supported by North Vietnamese forces--have recently made new advances in central Laos. They have forced the neutralist and conservative forces off the strategic Na Kay Plateau, which is an important link in the routes southward towards [Vietnam], and moved 15 miles of the Mekong River port of Thakhet. They can take Thakhet at will.

Although the Pathet Lao actions have gone well beyond the level of activity that had been tacitly accepted as permissible under the umbrella of the Geneva Accords. At the very least,

³ CIA Daily Brief, 02/28/64.

these actions are a probe designed to see how far the Geneva framework can be warped in favor of further communist encroachment. They have been accompanied by a substantial increase in Viet Minh presence and communist capabilities in the Plain des Jarres area as well. If we fail to react, the communists are likely to use this improved military capability with increasing aggressiveness in ways which must damage our position not only in Laos but in South [Vietnam].

We should not view an increased level of communist activity in Laos as an isolated phenomenon. The communist side almost certainly views the situation in all of Southeast Asia as one of change and opportunity. From the communist point of view the Free World position is in disarray: Recurring coups in South [Vietnam] and American admissions that the military situation there is not good; continued speculation in the Western press about neutralist solutions for the area, which has received impetus from General de Gaulle's formulas for ending hostilities in the area; and apparent [U.S.] indecision on how to respond to Prince Sihanouk's efforts to obtain guarantees of Cambodian neutrality by threatening to turn to communist China. All of those who today seek to reduce or eliminate the [U.S.] position in Southeast Asia—the communist Chinese, the French, the North Vietnamese, the Cambodians—appear to have one view in common: **the United States is either unable or unwilling to exert its vast power effectively to defend its positions in Southeast Asia. And in this, the communists may see an opportunity for decisive action.**⁴

For all these reasons, we must, in my judgment, respond promptly and firmly to communist initiatives in central Laos. We

⁴ Bold type is the Author's. Because of the Author's continuing distaste for communism and its ideology, the word will never be capitalized.

*should consider encouraging further Thai reinforcements along the Mekong backed up by visible preparations to introduce [U.S.] Marine landing battalions and air elements into Thailand..."*⁵

The Chinese factor remained critical to any realistic war plan. In February, Radio Hanoi broadcast that if the U.S. military attacked North Vietnam they would have to fight both North Vietnam and China.

Therefore, USG assumed that communist leaders were in close agreement and were engaged in a plan to warn us against any escalation north. When asked by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara about the capability and involvement Chinese military forces could produce in Southeast Asia, the Joint Chiefs of Staff indicated that China could move thirteen divisions, 400 jet planes, and 125 bombers during the dry season.

Vientiane Embassy message traffic from the ambassador to State stated that the deteriorating Lao situation was producing great anxiety in his area. The major concern was the ineffectiveness of the International Control Commission (ICC) to deal with the situation, particularly in Military Region Three where recent Pathet Lao gains had denied ICC investigation. Further consternation involved the Russian ICC Co-Chairman's inactive role in the matter and total failure to participate in the maintenance of peace and Lao neutrality. (High-level dialogue with Soviet diplomats to initiate Souvanna Phouma's request for the ICC to do something about the "Pathet Lao" in Xieng Khouang province failed when they brushed the offensive off as merely a minor internal difference.) A more ominous statement from Ambassador Unger offered advice that USG would have to consider stronger measures to protect interests in the area.

⁵ Roger Hilsman memorandum to the Secretary of State, who approved the measures, 02/15/64.

Ambassador Unger also opposed the Hilsman plan, fearing unraveling the few remaining facets of the Geneva agreements and squelching Souvanna Phouma's Neutralist situation.

During high-level Washington meetings, principals continued to discuss the problem, while memorandums and papers circulated through various levels of government. The case for introduction of U.S. troops to Thailand as a show of force proved especially thorny. It was believed no longer effective by many within military circles. As in 1962, the Joint Chiefs of Staff failed to support deployment of U.S. troops anywhere in Asia unless assured that it was part of a greater plan to win a war. It was not political objectives they questioned, but recalling the Korean stalemate and recent threats of Chinese intervention, the military value. They worried about moving north into Laos with inadequate assets should events dictate.

Advisors in the new Johnson Administration realized that a thorough review of communist Geneva Accords violations was necessary, as the proposed moves pointed to unraveling the Souvanna Phouma government. However, they favored less visible, innocuous measures to counter the enemy offensive. Recommendations focused on immediately upgrading the previously approved OPLAN 34-A-64 to selected portions of Phase-2, as specified in NSAM 256 of 31 July 1963. Many of these specifications were already a part of Agency operations, which involved a sizable expansion of covert Lao operations.

Other items included discriminatory use of six Lao T-28s, expansion of covert teams, enlarging existing Meo guerrilla units, expanding operations into enemy territory, and resumption of high level Laos photo reconnaissance. This would result in the first reconnaissance program--code named Lucky Dragon--conducted over Laos since USAF tactical RF-101 missions were discontinued in December 1962. Some of this was already

underway, as a SAC detachment of three U-2s were diligently mapping selected Lao border areas, deploying an additional six F-100 jets to the existing squadron in Thailand, and expanding or extending the current joint U.S.-Thai special warfare exercise.

Within the diplomatic sphere, recommendations followed to reassure allies of United States intentions to fulfill Southeast Asia commitments, to indicate that further measures for dealing with communist aggression was under consideration, to produce evidence of North Vietnamese intervention in Laos (Vang Pao hoped to capture a Vietnamese soldier during guerrilla forays on Route-7), and to publicize Vietnamese intervention in violation of the Geneva Accords.

Consultations were necessary with Souvanna Phouma in order to brief him on aspects of the plan to uphold the Geneva Accords, and to ensure support for his government. Meetings with Thai leaders on proposed decisions to use their territory and encourage them to strengthen military forces in the northeast were also planned. They also planned to meet with and inform Indian and Canadian governments and their ICC commissioners of USG's projected actions, and to press them to conduct more forceful action in relation to enemy movements.

Our loss of the Phou Khe complex placed the communists in a strong position to aggressively move against FAN-FAR positions on the Plain of Jars and dominate routes leading toward Tha Thom. It also added a disquieting dimension to the necessity for U.S. action in Laos. In the Lao cat and mouse game, it was an enemy tactic to attack and then pause for U.S. reaction. Then, if nothing was done, they would strike again. This new development again raised the issue of sending U.S. ground troops to Thailand. The Defense Secretary, after notifying and gaining

Thai authorities' approval, was prepared to send an additional twelve F-100s to Thakli Royal Thai Air Force Base. ⁶

In the end, after consolidating positions, the communist offensive and threats to Mekong River towns ceased.

Customer Tony Poe refused to accept the premise that with the advent of massive North Vietnamese Army intervention in Military Region Two, it was apparent that Vang Pao's previously effective Meo guerrilla movement was no longer functioning effectively. Because his guerrillas were drastically outnumbered and out-gunned, it was obvious that USG would have to increase its involvement and provide additional physical and mechanical support if operations were to continue in Laos, particularly in Military Region Two.

USG officials at the very highest levels in Laos, Thailand, and Washington hotly debated the issue over a period of many months. Every day drew closer to a critical turning point in the war that required a decision on the extent to which they were prepared to accelerate U.S. military resources to the total Lao effort. Continuance of the conflict necessitated an increase in American personnel, additional aircraft, and equipment, and this added involvement risked upsetting the country's delicate

⁶ Segment Sources:

Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Volume 27, Mainland Southeast Asia; Regional Affairs, Thailand, Consideration of Reintroduction of U.S. Troops into Thailand, Editorial Note, 264 (Washington: Department of State, Internet download.).

Message Traffic Vientiane to State, 02/21/64.

Memorandum for the Record, 02/24/64.

Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, Roger Hilsman, to Secretary of State Rusk, 02/25/64 & Draft Memorandum for the President.

Jacob Van Staaveren, 22.

Action Memorandum from Hilsman to Rusk, 02/28/64.

U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Kohler-Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, Andrei Gromyko; Rusk-Soviet Ambassador to the U.S., Anatoliy Dobrynin, Conversations.

Victor Anthony, 94.

balance of power. Increased support also chanced possible responses and escalation of the conflict by both the Soviet and Chinese military. Over the course of the period, several events and deteriorating military conditions occurred in South Vietnam and Cambodia to influence and stimulate more USG involvement. In addition, the Chinese placed more emphasis on road building projects in the northern parts of Laos that alarmed Thai government leaders. Therefore, the final outcome of high-level debates culminated in an official policy that continued for the entire war: that military and civilian assistance was justified in Laos because efforts there engaged large numbers of enemy troops and assisted USG efforts in South Vietnam.

In the meantime, Vang Pao's troops continued to suffer a terrible beating from a far superior adversary. The side effect of USG's lack of support and morale incentives led the Lao people, the Meo military, and civilian leaders in particular, to consider that the U.S. might not be entirely behind them. They also wondered if developments in Laos became untenable, whether the U.S. might depart and leave them to the mercy of the Vietnamese.⁷

FALL BACK CONSIDERATIONS

During the period, a dejected and concerned Vang Pao journeyed to Sayaboury Province to investigate the possibility of an area high and suitable enough for the people to relocate and survive should the U.S. decide to withdraw from the country. In this, he used good judgment, as the province was located on the government side of a theoretical 1954 Geneva Accords line.

⁷ Ambassador William Sullivan's future testimony to a Congressional sub-committee indicated that in the beginning it was always USG policy to leave the Lao theater within twenty-four hours should this become necessary.

Vang Pao came away reassured it was definitely a good fall back area. Though elevations in the Sayaboury Mountains were generally lower than the Meo liked, the hills were adequate for slash-and-burn rice and corn cultivation and ample water existed to satisfy the people's needs.

It was also a difficult period for American government workers in Laos harboring the identical concerns as Vang Pao. In retrospect, IVS-USAID worker Blaine Jensen never imagined at the time that he would witness the eventual massive U.S. and Thai involvement that later ensued in the Theater. However, taking a pragmatic view of the situation, there was never any question in his mind that USG would eventually walk away from Laos and leave the hill people to fend for themselves, whether there was a negotiated peace or a communist take-over of the country. This philosophy made it extremely difficult for him to perform his job, but that is what he did. His desire was that whatever the ultimate conclusion of the South Vietnamese conflict, a negotiated settlement advantageous to all would occur in Laos. With most of the young men dead or crippled, it would have been difficult for the Meo to persevere and prosper without outside aid, but they were a hardy race and he believed that, if allowed a peaceful existence in their mountain environment, they would make a spectacular return to their former status. ⁸

⁸ Blaine Jensen Letters, 04/29/96, 05/06/97.

Virl Black and his family departed Air America and Southeast Asia. Ironically, just as he and Gina boarded a Company aircraft one evening for Bangkok, a Twix arrived from Taipei offering him official Chief Pilot status at the increased management pay scale. However, his plans to leave Air America were firm and irrevocable. ¹

Virl's departure created a temporary, but crucial void in the local management structure. It also heightened speculation as to who would be elevated to the exalted position. From what I understood at the time, Ben Moore and the headquarters hype indicated that everyone was under consideration for the job. Of course, those already working in the office, or in some capacity related to management, and senior pilots, certainly enjoyed a leg up on us lower echelon line pilots. Impassioned talk around the compound, and on the sidewalk between the Club and the Administration Building, centered daily on who would ultimately be selected. I told Bill Cook, and he agreed, that we would never accept such a thankless job, even on the remote possibility that it might be offered.

From Bob Hitchman's haughty demeanor, it appeared that he was the self-professed leading candidate for the chief pilot vacancy. It was clear why he had politicked and brown-nosed Ben Moore and Jim Coble, as he had with Abadie before he left on his Taipei assignment. Bob desperately coveted the CPH slot to the point of being obnoxious. He was largely unpopular with peers. Because of his take-charge aggressiveness, abrasive personality,

¹ Gina Black later became ultra-religious, and the couple divorced. In later years, Virl returned to Udorn in the capacity of a line pilot.

Marshall Email, 09/06/99.

and a tendency to badmouth other pilots who might threaten his self-presumed authority, there was a certain amount of anxiety among the pilot group about his perceived elevation to a "das Fuhrer" status. Most disturbing, he strutted and acted at times as if he had already been selected CPH. No one I knew wanted to work for Bob. Alarmed and concerned, hoping our concerns would reach Ben Moore, we even mentioned leaving Air America should Hitchman receive the nod for CPH. Of course, these were merely idle words. Fortunately, ones that never required testing.

THE RIGHT DECISION

The permanent CPH slot remained in limbo for a time, while all candidates were being vetted and considered. Since he was already performing the primary training and test job, and COO, Jim Coble planned to leave to pursue non-flying business interests in Singapore, Captain Wayne Knight worked in the office after returning from a Taipei briefing. Wayne ultimately became acting, or de facto, Chief Pilot. Except for minor exposure to mundane office procedures, there was no adjustment period as Assistant Chief Pilot. Admittedly, he was young and relatively inexperienced for the job. During an interim period, in which he conducted a myriad of duties in a semi-daze, he believed Ben attempted to have headquarters return Abadie to assume his old position, but the switch proved impossible at the time. In the meantime, Wayne demonstrated a competence to perform the many tasks required. He found the job very demanding, for there was no Operations Manager or other help available. He arrived at the airfield around 0400 hours, well before Moore, a notoriously early riser, and labored sixteen-hour days. He received satisfaction by greeting Ben at 0500 hours with a, "Good afternoon, sir." Wayne often did not return to his growing family before 2000 hours. He believed that Ben

admired his work ethic, and they quickly formed a genuinely close relationship. He assumed that following a short period of observing his efforts, Ben had cancelled his request for Abadie's return to Udorn, and had actually recommended Knight for the permanent CPH position. Consequently, retroactively on 19 March, Wayne was elevated to Acting Project Chief Pilot Helicopters for the Madriver Project. Wayne once worked 200 days without time off. No one dictated that such devotion to the job was necessary, but Ben also lived and spent as much time in the compound, so Wayne accepted that it was expected of him as well. Even today, he is confident that this was a paramount item that cemented his relations with Moore, whom he considered an excellent boss.

From almost everyone's viewpoint, Wayne Knight was an outstanding management choice, for he carried no negative baggage into the position. The organization gained a talented hard worker, who faithfully performed managerial duties for many years. Moreover, pilots obtained a certain stability in a person they could trust and respect. He was one of them, whom they considered had their interests in mind. Generally everyone liked and trusted Wayne, and we were all very happy when he became our new boss. As a former line pilot with a great personality, he was a realistic supervisor.

Aviation, particularly our demanding type, seemed to foster stress and excessive consumption of alcohol. Wayne enjoyed a cool beer or two after work. At first, it was common for him to drop by the bar for a drink and chat with his men, something Abadie **never** did while holding the CPH position. Wayne liked his beer, but after mustering out of the Corps and returning to Thailand to work for Air America, he had a problem with Thai-manufactured alcohol. He could not stand Mekong whiskey and did

not particularly like the strong Singha beer. ² However, he practiced hard and eventually overcame his dislike for Singha.

In contrast, Abadie was a dreadful drinker. When drunk, he became exceptionally nasty and mean. ³ Wayne observed Ab on only a couple of occasions when he appeared seriously drunk and was on the verge of fighting with everyone around him. One night, making an exception to his normal teetotaling policy, while drunk, he unmercifully abused a subordinate.

Charlie Weitz and Abadie had been squadron mates at Yokosuka, Japan, and Charlie told Wayne that Ab had serious drinking problems while in Japan. Ab was cognizant of this problem, and in the future, rarely lost control by allowing himself to consume dangerous, if any amount of alcohol. Wayne had many opportunities to observe this abstention as he held many home barbecues with Ben and Ab, and the COO never drank. Wayne respected Ab for this resolve, for he was well aware that Ab enjoyed a drink as much as others.

After returning from the Taipei assignment later in the year, and observing Wayne commingling with the troops, Abadie cautioned Wayne that he was no longer one of the boys, and should distance himself from us unwashed souls.

Upon appointment to Project Chief Pilot, Wayne's pay status became retroactive to 1 March. There were continual flip-flops on salary and flight restrictions that went with the job. Upon accepting the position, he received a higher base salary, including all line pilot extras: deadhead, hostile, overtime, and night pay. Later headquarters decided that some individuals in top supervisory positions were flying upcountry far too much

² Singa: Pronounced Sing, the a at the end of the word was silent.

³ Ab once told me that drinking made him sick, so he preferred to abstain.

and not devoting sufficient attention to management duties from behind a desk. Pay scales were then changed. Base pay was elevated and extras disallowed. Of course, this tactic did not work, as none of the managers would go into the field without remuneration. Therefore, policy was again modified to allow the extras. Wayne favored the original policy, for it was impossible to perform a comprehensive job from a desk, far removed from the action. We appreciated his "hands-on" attitude, for it allowed us someone in management to experience first hand the hazards and the dismal lifestyle the crews endured in Pop Buell's mountain retreat.

After CJ Abadie returned to Udorn in the capacity of COO, Wayne did not recall him venturing upcountry. Wayne never fully understood this approach to management. Ab never asked the CPH for operational information, but believing it proper, the CPH briefed him anyway. However, his superior never exhibited great interest in upcountry helicopter operations.

Before long, Wayne realized that he required a loyal, competent individual as Assistant Chief Pilot, mainly to perform his former training and test duties, particularly those critical to upcountry operations. No other pilot candidate in our small group impressed him so much as the respected former U.S. Army Warrant Officer Julian "Scratch" Kanach. Everyone agreed that easygoing Scratch possessed the best instructor talent and was by far the helicopter branch's superior aviator. Scratch accepted the job, but when flying hours later increased, he opted out as ACP in favor of a line pilot slot with greater potential to earn money. This was consistent with the majority of pilots' goals: to earn as much money as possible and return home with a nice stake.

HITCHMAN BUGS OUT

Bob Hitchman, already less than elated with Knight's selection as the new chief pilot, quit in a huff when he failed to be nominated for an ACPH job. After he departed for Bird and Son, to a man, his former peers shed no tears. Always treating Wayne as "The Kid," he occasionally swaggered into the office to gloat that flying for Bird was a wonderful experience. However, like a bad penny, when the program required additional pilots, Bob returned to Udorn the following year to resume flying helicopters. There was never any animosity between Wayne and Bob. On the surface, the CPH got along well with him and was an occasional dinner guest at his house. Wayne trusted Hitch as well as the average person, and they never had confrontations or firsthand criticism. However, Wayne did hear many second hand comments about him that were attributed to Bob. ⁴

WHOOPS

Early in the month, to share responsibilities pending during office re-staffing, I was assigned a couple of short test flights in Hotel-12 and Hotel-13. One was with John Timmons, and the other with both Timmons and Joe Marlin.

To facilitate night maintenance checks when pilots were drinking or sleeping, a handful of qualified American mechanics were assigned engine run-ups, and one or two more competent ones were allowed to conduct full rotor engagement. As trained professionals, we looked on this specialty with a jaundiced eye, for we were not convinced that unconcerned individuals would report any errors of commission such as overspeeds during the operation, and we would eventually suffer dire consequences upcountry.

⁴ EW Knight Emails, 07/02/00, 07/04/00, 04/11/01.

John Timmons was one of only two maintenance personnel allowed to fully engage rotors; Supervisor John Aspinwall was the other. Timmons was performing a run-up one night under the lights when he experienced a primary servo malfunction while disengaging the auxiliary servo. He had amassed considerable bogus flying time with friendly pilots upcountry, so, as the aircraft lifted, he considered attempting to hover rather than turning the auxiliary servo back on. However, before he could react the helicopter violently flipped onto its side. Fortunately, he was not injured, only confused and badly shaken. The accident marked cessation of non-pilot run-ups.

The H-34 hydraulic system was not Murphy proof, particularly the quick disconnect lines. An after-incident examination revealed that a naive individual had crossed the primary and auxiliary servo lines. Because of heavy operational requirements, night maintenance was necessary, and top supervisors with an understaffed unit could not work twenty-four hours, seven days a week. Therefore, to lessen the chance of similar occurrences, all pipeline attachments were brightly color-coded. The incident also pointed to serious errors of commission that could be perpetrated by poorly trained or inattentive workers in a dimly lighted hangar.

The incident provided a wakeup call for me. I read all the logbook gripes and normally performed a good preflight. However, following the Timmons incident, realizing mechanics' limitations at night, I redoubled my efforts to examine a ship that I was assigned to test or take upcountry early in the morning. These efforts would reward me handsomely several times in the future, when in full daylight, I discovered battle damage on a leading edge of a rotor blade and transmission brace cracks, items virtually invisible under night time conditions.

MEMO

We were approaching the worst time of the year for engine problems. It was called the hot season. Therefore, John Aspinwall's maintenance section issued a blanket memorandum to remind all pilots of the challenging situation. It stated in brief:

"Heat, dust, and prolonged use of high rpm are major factors in reducing reciprocating engine life. Historically, we can prove more aircraft are damaged and lost per flying hour during the hot season than at any other time of the year.

Because helicopters operate a great deal in the vicinity of the ground and at relatively low altitudes, the effects of elevated ambient temperatures and increased atmospheric dust prevalent during the SEA hot-dry (to include the smoky) season are especially aggravated. This is particularly the case in combination with prolonged high power settings more frequently necessary to accomplish high-altitude missions during summer operations.

Since inception of the Udorn helicopter program in 1961, there has been a significant increase in premature R-1820 engine removal during the months of March through June. During these periods, maintenance tracked increased deteriorated engine conditions, high oil consumption, and an alarming rate of in-flight power malfunctions or failures. Engines fail for the same general reason during the hot season; they just fail more frequently and less predictably. Additionally, average engine life, the time since overhaul (TSO) in the summer months dropped to 300 hours as compared to 570 hours during the rainy season, and a nominal engine replacement interval of 600 hours.

The human element is also affected by hot, dry conditions. The result is that flight and maintenance crews are more prone to err and are likely to overlook potentially important

discrepancies, and less critical of those they discover during inspections."

I agreed with the informative memorandum, but realistically understood that it was impossible to shut our operation down during this critical period. One item not mentioned was the fact that we possessed few H-34s, and were literally squeezing the guts out of them by attempting to fly every hour we could. Because of other Southeast Asian commitments, helicopter parts were in short supply. Lastly, the pilot's tender loving care that I believed in and professed varied greatly, depending on the individual. Some pilots were exceptionally careful during operations, but others were only concerned about using the machine as a tool to make money. Even with later attempts at pilot standardization, this problem continued, and was never fully resolved.

FEMALE PROBLEMS

Sang began complaining of vague pains in her lower left side. When there was no improvement, I took her to the Udorn provincial hospital for consultation with Doctor Kassam, an extraordinary individual who built, staffed, and administered the facility. He was popular with the local people and Americans, but the hospital plant was very rudimentary. Still, it was the only one available in the province. Kassam, wealthy from his endeavors, was the owner of a green Mercedes Benz sedan, the only one in the region, and, except for Bangkok, perhaps in the entire country. ⁵

⁵ Attesting to the clear and present danger on Thai roads, Kassam and his wife were later killed during an encounter with a truck on the Friendship Highway south of Khon Khaen.

Following his examination, the doctor ushered us into his spartan office. He indicated that Sang suffered from an ovarian cyst, common to women in the region because of a vitamin A deficiency. When he recommended an operation, the terrified girl began to cry. To allay her fears, Kassam, mainly directing his conversation to me, assured us that she would be all right: she was young, from the area, and would tolerate the less-than-sanitary hospital conditions easier than a Westerner would.

'Less than adequate' proved a gross understatement. Her ward in the wooden structure was merely a long barracks-like room. Jutting into the main room were three small partitioned "private" rooms. As no private rooms were immediately available, following the successful operation, she was required to remain on the primitive ward. Chaos prevailed. There were no beds, only woven mats carelessly thrown on the floor to accommodate the patient and relatives. As an integral part of a patient's recovery, families were required to deliver food in stacked metal containers, and actually care for the patient's needs. To implement this, country folk, probably having no other lodging, remained full time with their loved ones. Naked overhead light bulbs were never extinguished; adults conversed and children shouted at all hours; and dogs wandered aimlessly throughout the building searching for tidbits. It was difficult to imagine how anyone could rest, much less recuperate, in such a noisy, non-sterile environment. Perhaps my next-door neighbors, reluctant to take their infant to the hospital, had been right about people going to the hospital to die. Even Sang admitted that the place was like a hotel.

After a week, a "private room" costing thirty baht per day became available. It was merely walled off from the disorder occurring outside, and did nothing to dampen the noise level. However, there were two beds, a stand, and the small cubicle

floor was easy to broom. As I would be out of place, and not always be available, Sang had a "cousin" care for her. ⁶

I was acquainted with the "cousin." Unmarried, she had previously become pregnant, and, after attempting several measures to abort the fetus, had ended up on the same ward. According to Sang, during the dangerous process to expel the child, she ingested pills and toxic concoctions, and, as a last resort, had an old woman drastically manipulate her abdomen. When we visited her, she lay on a rude bed wearing a cloth belt with pockets containing hot flat stones. Lying beside her was a blue, wrinkled, undeveloped stillborn human. The sight was repugnant, and did nothing to endear me to the strange culture and its often barbaric practices.

POOL COMPLETION

After local workers finished framing the sides of the pool, cement was poured on the fifth. Because of the runway work and nocturnal coolness, the operation began at 2100 hours. The cement and equipment belonged to a construction company which had erected a large batching plant across the taxiway from our compound. In contrast to cement used for the pool floor, which had been bartered for drums of asphalt and the use of our D-4 bulldozer, this larger amount of concrete was paid out of the 5,100 dollars allocated from Taipei. Cement trucks began arriving, tearing up what precious little grass had survived the project. First loads were sluiced into the wooden forms through chutes that could be maneuvered down the perimeter as the forms filled. However, with no room to drive a large vehicle on the

⁶ Thai Cousin: Largely a generic term, it was impossible to comprehend the true relationship among Thais, as women customarily called friends sister or cousin.

Club side, much of the cement had to be laboriously wheel barrowed and dumped between the forms.

Following the laborious and lengthy steel-welding stint in the pit, my back still bothered me, so I assumed the role of a sidewalk supervisor. To make the night more pleasant, particularly during the waits for additional trucks to arrive, the Club provided cold beer. Jack Connor, perhaps the only one able and knowledgeable about the equipment, wielded a vibrator provided by the contractor to ensure that the aggregate mixed and settled vertically.

The buzz of machines, copious beer, horseplay, and hearty laughs kept everyone going until completion. Spurred on by the approach of the end of the long, tedious job, at 0200 hours, the work was considered complete, at the expense of a full night's sleep. There were additional tasks ahead, but they could wait until the curing process was complete. In addition to form removal, plumbing and drainage lines awaited installation. Tile installation of a yet-to-be-determined color was to be contracted to a Bangkok firm. Pool sides had to be backfilled with dirt, and a one-meter cement lip fashioned around the perimeter. We were proud of our accomplishment. It comprised the largest swimming pool in the country. One with identical specifications would have easily cost 15,000 to 20,000 dollars in the States, an amount more than three times our actual outlay.

The communist threat to Southeast Asia and the Far East, as perceived by leaders in Washington at this time, was a worldwide force operating under central guidance. Moreover, it was believed that the downfall of, or substantial enemy gains in Vietnam, could precipitate the loss of Burma, Thailand, Philippines, India, Australia, and Japan. Therefore, to counter threats to American interests, President Johnson, during National Security Meeting 288 (NASM), approved the expansion and acceleration of certain secret contingency plans for Laos and Cambodia. [USAF plans and projects] They included ground-launched cross border hot pursuit, and clandestine air strikes against North Vietnamese military installations and guerrilla sanctuaries inside the Lao and Cambodian borders. Also included were long-range contingency plans for massive bombing of North Vietnam.

During the early days of March, substantial message traffic flowed from the Lao Embassy to the State Department regarding the Lao situation. A current situation synopsis indicated that communist objectives were crafted to reduce Neutralist-held zones piecemeal, without triggering American response. The Prime Minister's goal planned to eliminate Laos from the ensuing conflict by continuing a Neutralist strategy. The objective would continue to present an outward appearance to the world of a Neutralist government. Therefore, USG would labor toward a limited goal of preserving the Geneva structure against the day when Laos was pacified and unified. Stability of neutral zones had to be maintained, and further communist expansion into these zones could not be tolerated. The U.S. Embassy Country Team (a term not generally used in message traffic) agreed that military action, which did not exceed the limitations of a Neutralist

solution, would significantly alter the outcome in Laos. Of course, any action would first have to be discussed with civilian Souvanna Phouma and military leader General Phoumi, a man favoring substantial escalation to further involve USG.

Ambassador Unger plunged into detail, declaring that he and his subordinates were ardently struggling to maintain the Geneva Accords.

Unger held the view that the immediate problem facing Laos was defending the Military Region Two contested zone against Pathet Lao forces and their Viet Minh stiffeners. He indicated that without the Vietnamese, the Pathet Lao were of little concern to the RLA.

In thought-provoking 'what if' verbiage, the Ambassador interjected that if USG objectives intended to defend the Meo, the lower Mekong Valley, and ensure Thailand's security, then the communists should be forewarned that any offensive movement, such as threatening moves toward Thakhet, would provoke U.S. reaction. This also included all river towns.

If USG's objective went beyond protecting friendly river towns, and included maintaining Laos in a free and neutral status, then the communists had to be thwarted in their territorial acquisitions and unrestricted utilization of logistic arteries to South Vietnam. Under present USG policy, these goals were impossible to accomplish without the introduction of U.S. military assets.

A key problem in the entire Lao equation revolved around the fact that whenever initiating stronger military options against the Pathet Lao, friendly forces' gross limitations constituted a major factor. Indeed, these deficiencies had been recently demonstrated in the Military Region Two Phu Khe area.

Intended as near term solutions, Unger recommended enlarging Kong Le's manpower resources to a level of 8,200,

preparing for an increase in the military assistance program (MAP), more efficiently utilizing the small number of T-28 aircraft, and enhancing the economic and political strength of Souvanna Phouma's Royal Lao Government.

Longer-range planning inevitably centered on the subject of air power, its usefulness in neutralizing enemy advances, and especially stabilizing the balance of power. The air asset seemed the most likely solution in lieu of the negative political ramifications of introducing U.S. ground troops.

So far, it was clear that the six T-28s within the RLAF inventory were virtually negligible to the overall picture. They were only instrumental in influencing the outcome of minor tactical situations. Thus far, RLAF pilots had flown few combat missions, and their aggressiveness could not be well judged. However, the plane was already deemed a positive morale factor for ground troops. Despite limitations, T-28s were the preferred airborne artillery weapon. In addition, they were really only retrofitted training aircraft, and could easily be classified as such in world opinion. However, using only Lao personnel to implement the air program involved enormous problems. Mainly, there were limitations on the size of the Royal Lao Air Force, differences in individual pilot skills, staff work, and ground-air coordination.

While evaluating present policy and equipment, American Army Military Attaches (ARMA), U.S. Air Force Air Attaches (AIRA), and Requirements Office (RO) personnel, planned to continue their advisory efforts to improve staff work and endeavor to improve cooperation between FAR and RLAF leaders. In addition, timing of air strikes outfitted with a minimal allowed armament of rockets and guns, mounted on relatively slow flying aircraft, presented danger from AAA weapons, particularly in and around gun concentrations on the Plain of Jars. Problems arose

with requests for timely and effective strikes. The various administrative levels required clearing proposed attacks through Washington and Souvanna Phouma, and the planning for strikes often required several days.

Near term, the ambassador believed an effective air deterrent necessitated drastic relaxation of the current policy relating to the employment of T-28 for operations. This included 500-pound bombs equipped with fuses, increased visual and photographic reconnaissance, and the granting of greater Lao authority to use these assets for "defensive" purposes. Still considered a bug-a-boo, controversial napalm would not be employed at this time. Numerous lucrative targets included interdicting supply routes leading to North Vietnam, bombing supply depots (east of Khang Khay), and artillery positions harassing Neutralist headquarters at Moung Phan and around Phou Khe to prepare for its possible recapture. Enemy armor and rolling stock would be fair game wherever encountered.

At the same time, General Curtis Lemay requested that Secretary Robert McNamara permit tactical, low-level U.S. aerial reconnaissance in Laos and North Vietnam to supplement and provide additional detail about recent high-level U-2 flights that revealed extensive enemy logistical activity on the eastern Plain of Jars and in the Military Region Three Panhandle. However, Ambassador Unger interjected that low-level flights for such purposes would ultimately be exposed and publicized. ¹

¹ Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction*.
Ken Conboy.
Leonard Unger.
Victor Anthony, 95.

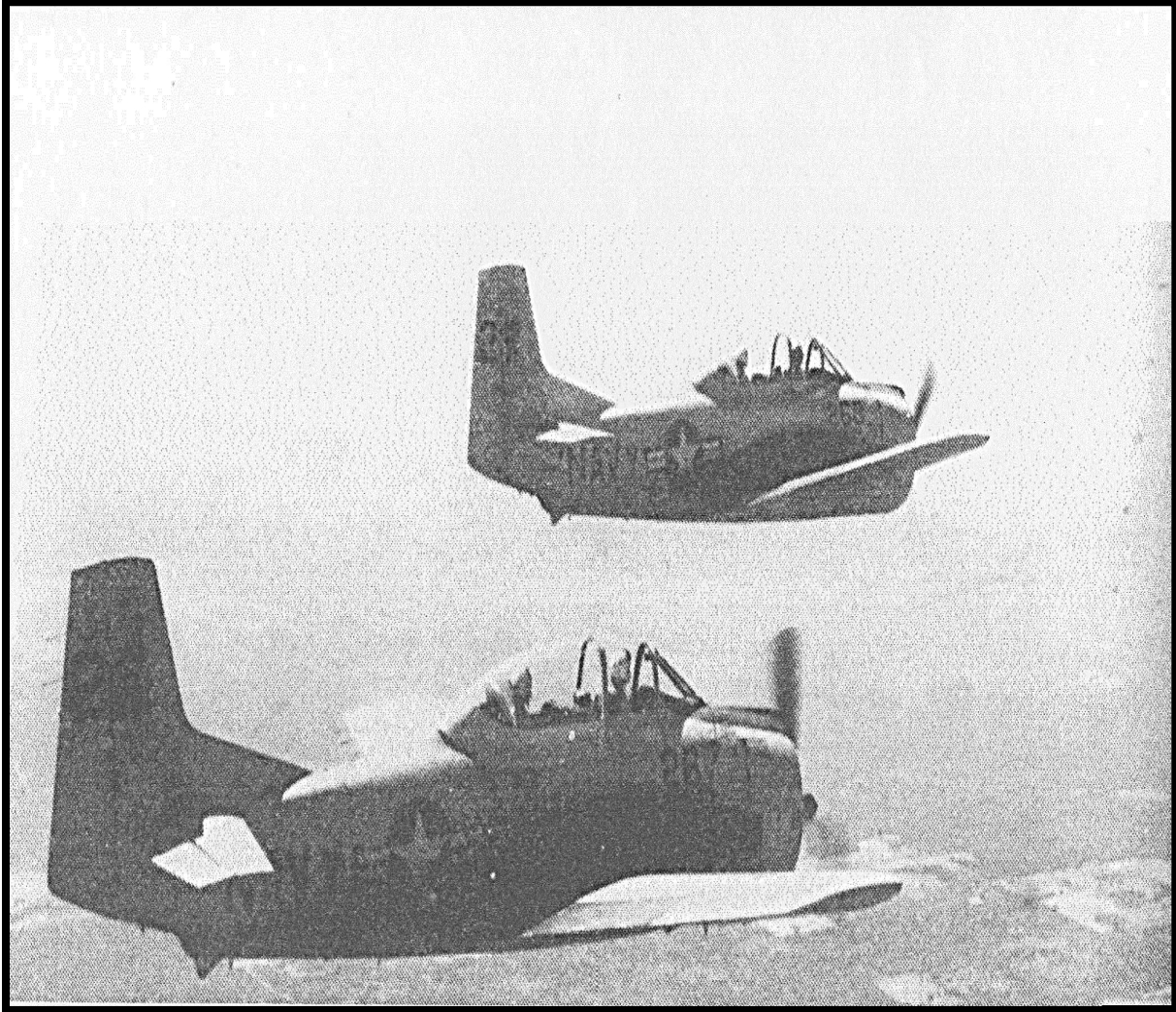
AIR COMMANDOS

Toward the end of 1963, a Special Air Warfare (SAW) detachment from Eglin Air Force Base was considered for deployment to Udorn RTAFB, Thailand, by Pacific Air Force (PACAF), under the auspices of the U.S Military Assistance Program (MAP). The mission was intended to train Lao and Thai pilots in flying counterinsurgency tactics. Such a step was believed to have the capability to improve Lao aircraft maintenance and pilot performance over time.

Major "Barney" Cochran had recently returned to Hurlburt Air Field from a six month tour in Nam, where he headed the T-28 program, and flew over one hundred combat support missions. Before long, he heard scuttlebutt about a requirement for a Thailand fixed wing training detachment like the one he had left. Then, in February, "Heine" Aderholt asked Cochran to select his finest instructors to establish a Thailand training mission.

After concurring with a proposed requirement for additional air assets to improve the RLA operation, respective U.S. Ambassadors and leaders from both Thai and Lao governments cleared the process. Defense Secretary McNamara then approved assignment of a SAW T-28 detachment of thirty eight enlisted men and officers to Udorn. Consequently, on 5 March orders rippled through the chain of command, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and General LeMay, Chief of Staff USAF, to deploy four T-28s and the necessary pilot and mechanic personnel six month temporary duty (TDY) to Udorn.

On 9 March, four boxed T-28s were loaded on C-130 cargo planes and flown from Hurlburt to Bien Hoa, South Vietnam. Men and officers followed in a KC-135. Upon arrival, Waterpump Detachment Six (Det-6) of the First Air Commando Wing began assembling the T-28s and preparing to move them into Thailand.



U.S. Navy T-28 Charlie model trainers, the type delivered to Southeast Asia for Royal Lao Air Force General Ma's pilots to provide support and strafe and rocket enemy forces.

Author Collection.

Eight days after the marching order had been issued to deploy, the advanced unit began positioning to Udorn. In addition to the primary mission of training Lao pilots and mechanics, other stipulated tasks were the maintenance of Lao planes, supplementation of RLAF sorties if required in case of an enemy offensive, and tactical advice to AIRA Vientiane. The Waterpump detachment would also form the core of future air operations should the balloon go up in Laos. ²

At the highest levels in Thailand, there was concern among embassy staff of coup d'etat rumors regarding the struggle for power between Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn and Field Marshall Prapass Charusathien. After ordering his attaches, JUSMAG, and CIA to examine the situation, Ambassador Martin discounted any immediate problem.

Embassy personnel had conducted serious discussions with Thai leaders over the previous eight months about the Lao crises. Like the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington, the Thai were not convinced of the value of redeploying American troops into the country as an effective deterrence in the present situation where, so far, the Pathet Lao and Viet Minh were merely gobbling up small pieces of Laos. For the same reason, Air Marshal Dawee Chulasapya, Deputy Minister of Defense and

² Segment Sources:

Telegram from the Embassy in Laos to the Department of State, 01/03/64.

Telegram Laos to State, 01/03/64.

Professor William Leary Notes.

Project *CHECO*, 12.

U.S. Foreign Relations 1964-68, Volume 27, Thailand, Memorandum from Michael V. Forrestal, Member of the National Security Council Staff, to NSA Bundy #265.

Victor Anthony, 97.

Date and Author Unknown, USAF Plans and Policies in South Vietnam and Laos, 1964, USAF Historical Division Liaison Office, 72,73.

Don Moody, *The Great Adventures of Bob and Don, Nevermore Until Tomorrow: Short Stories from Laos 1961-1975*, 2-3, (<http://aircommandos.org/BobAndDon/Episode0000.htm>).

Chief of Staff of the Supreme Command of Thailand, also squelched a proposed increase of F-100 units to Thakli.

Summing up the situation, the ambassador was certain the Thai were willing to assist USG with their assets and prepared to participate in cases that would lead to thwarting the communist advance throughout Southeast Asia. There was no coup.³

As the month progressed, with Washington's blessing, General Phoumi Nosavan met with South Vietnamese Premier Khan. In addition to resuming diplomatic relations, they hammered out a mutual agreement which provided unrestricted passage of the southern border to Army of Vietnam (ARVN) units and mutual intelligence sharing. With creation of a Lao-Vietnamese targeting staff, unmarked South Vietnamese T-28 planes would be employed against enemy positions. ARVN officers would participate with Lao ground units during hot pursuit operations. A five man South Vietnamese liaison team would work with Lao forces at Savannakhet. Commando actions mounted from a Meo base east of Xieng Khouang would impact Route-7. These ambitious plans provided a framework for joint military actions over the years in Military Region Three and Military Region Four.

Phoumi reached these bilateral agreements without conferring with Souvanna Phouma. However, because he was responsible for actions in Laos with international implications, the Prime Minister took exception to any bombing of Tchepone and only modest border crossings. At this time, Ambassador Unger withheld sensitive information regarding Meo activity along

³ FRUS Thailand, Hilsman Message to Graham Martin, #266, 02/03/64. Martin to State, #268, 04/03/64.

Route-7 and kept aerial photography under wraps. ^{4 5}

With his new freedom of operation pertaining to air support, at General Phoumi's request, Ambassador Unger requested the release of one hundred pound bomb fuses to the RLAF for strikes against AAA installations and Pathet Lao positions outside Ban Nong Boua in Military Region Three. Located in a traditionally government area, seventeen miles north northeast of Ken Kok, and three miles southeast of Moung Phalane, the area was deemed a key communications center. Six months previously, after considerable skirmishing, the town was attacked and fell to the enemy's January sweep. Since that time, the FAR had been attempting to recapture Nong Boua and the surrounding area to prevent further Pathet Lao movement toward Keng Kok and the Seno airbase.

Current actions by Vientiane-based paratroop battalions were stalled by an estimated 200 enemy, supported by four armored cars, and possibly two tanks holding firmly entrenched positions outside the village. T-28 rocket strikes, in support of friendly ground attacks, failed to eliminate enemy positions. Two planes were hit by AAA fire.

Release of essential bomb fuses was predicated on an accurate situation report, and dissemination through worldwide press sources about Pathet Lao aggression within a recognized government area. ⁶ After cautioning Phoumi to avoid hitting the village, Unger planned to release a small number of fuses for an initial strike the following morning.

⁴ For obvious reasons, Agency sponsored operations were not freely disseminated.

⁵ John Pratt, *Vietnam Voices*, p-163.
Report from CAS Chief of Station Saigon, 3/16/64.
Leonard Unger to State, 03/19/64.

⁶ Accurate intelligence was a misnomer in a country with poor communications.

In the first ever allowed RLAF custody of bomb fuses, State sanctioned a limited number of fuses for the FAR counter-attack to regain lost territory, and a reprisal in response to the Pathet Lao attack. However, before the planes could attack with bombs, a meeting occurred on the Plain of Jars and a cease-fire was declared. ⁷

Political uncertainty continued in Vientiane when FAR intelligence officer Lieutenant Praseuth was assassinated on 17 March. ⁸ Within days of the murder, Phoumi's closely controlled police force arrested twenty three Neutralist officers, purportedly on information given under duress by individuals regarding the assassination. This treatment caused a stir among the Neutralist faction, who threatened to withdraw all forces on the Plain of Jars to Moung Phanh.

As the situation became more serious daily, Souvanna Phouma informed Unger that he requested that the ICC organization post guards on three Neutralist locations in town that night, and for several days thereafter. Furthermore, should the current animosity not improve, he and his Neutralist faction would move to safety on the Plain. He believed it was time for the King to intervene and use his prestige to encourage all the various factions to rally around him, help resolve differences, and begin working to improve conditions in the country.

Over the following two weeks, the abrasive situation in Vientiane did not improve between Rightists and Neutralists, and spiraled downward toward a bottomless pit. Hedging his bets, Souvanna had already sent his Neutralist ministers to the Plain

⁷ Leonard Unger-State, 03/20/64.
State-Unger, 03/20/64.
Victor Anthony, 97-98.

⁸ Within a month, the murder and the unrest it caused produced dire repercussions for Laos, and precipitated a renewal of a shooting war.

of Jars. Relations between the Prime Minister and Phoumi were at a low ebb, largely because of the general's previous agreement with South Vietnam's Premier to allow cross border operations without first consulting him. Also disconcerting to Souvanna and the State Department was Phoumi's corrupt dealings in casinos and other conflicts of interest.

State recommended improving security in the administrative city using joint military patrols. As Souvanna was on a junket-- whenever relations became strained in the capital, Souvanna Phouma would leave--to China and North Vietnam for support, it was considered imperative to improve the atmosphere in the city before his return, for he might also depart for the Plain of Jars. If this occurred, the Prime Minister would be isolated from other non-communist elements, which could lead to a crisis that would destroy any remaining Geneva agreements. ⁹

⁹ Unger-State, 03/21/64.
Secretary of State Dean Rusk-Leonard Unger, 04/02/64.
Vientiane Embassy Note to State, 04/02/64.

Nineteen sixty-four presented my first challenging smoky season upcountry. If conditions in the Udorn area were any indication of those upcountry, I knew that navigating in Laos would be demanding, as even stepping out on my porch, I could barely see across Soi Wat Po in the morning. With additional refugees relocated to Sam Tong and its environs performing traditional slash and burn agriculture, just flying in the local area presented a huge challenge. Restricted visibility conditions required a reappraisal of acquired checkpoints, and stressed correctly reading and crossing ground reference points.

Assigned Hotel-13, I drew Flight Mechanics old Punzalan and Carl Gable. Carl, increasingly taking the role of a ground mechanic, was journeying to Long Tieng in order to assess recent battle damage (BD) sustained to Captain Charlie Weitz's ship.

During a two aircraft assignment, Mike Marshall and Charlie had been charged to retrieve refugees from the Tha Lin Noi (VS-18) area, then under pressure from enemy units beginning a general sweep through Meo land after their recent victory at Phu Khe. With General Direction along for crowd control and to point the way, using eastern foothills for cover, Mike and Charlie flew a track through forward visibility-restricting haze and smoke along the periphery of the Plain of Jars, then they backtracked south to the ville. During the return trip, Mike flew at altitude, while Charlie proceeded at a lower level to better identify landmarks, and to negate spatial relationship problems because of faulty console instruments. ¹ In spite of

¹ Because of Mike's proclivity to fly at altitude, in a self-deprecating remark, Marshall referred to himself as mile-high Marshall.

this precaution, Charlie continued to encounter and fight vertigo, and he eventually strayed over an enemy hornet nest. His ship was hit. Electing to land at Long Tieng, an ensuing inspection revealed a large opening in the fuselage, a flat right tire, and a pierced oil cooler. Mike, who considered himself proficient in instrument flying, knew Charlie was not a very good IMC pilot. He regretted not offering to trade helicopters, as pilots often did to help a challenged buddy. He committed a second error when he joked about the aircraft damage and an angry Weitz took exception to the levity. According to Mike, Charlie and he never got along particularly well following this incident. ²

After depositing Carl at The Alternate, I was assigned a trip across Padong Ridge to the Padong airstrip, where Meo troops prepared to counter enemy pressure certain to impact the site shortly.

Smoke and haze was pervasive, but not quite as adverse as I had anticipated, and certainly not like the horrible conditions I later encountered: an eighth of a mile forward visibility that required flying precise headings and peering straight down to ensure crossing known checkpoints. Flying in such conditions while remaining VFR, one had to fly a little slower and higher to ensure adequate terrain clearance. Reduced visibility and increased altitude created orientation problems in recognizing sites flown over many times before. Therefore, as in the case of flying under low clouds during the rainy season the previous year, I had to relearn the entire local area. Such flying was stressful and demanding, and required a lot of effort. With the tense enemy situation to the east, one could not afford to stray

² Mike Marshall Mail Regarding the Author's 09/14/92 Questions. Marshall Emails, 08/14/99, 08/15/99, 08/19/99.

far off course. Therefore, as first recommended to me by more experienced aviators, if a reference point was not recognized within a reasonable time and distance, I retraced my course to a last known point, then started out again.

Flying during the height of the smoky season, before the onset of clearing rains, could be equated to feeling one's way through a huge, hot, smoky incinerator. Soaring as high as 10,000-feet, the witches' caldron of nature's elements, sometimes mixed with towering cumulus clouds, rose too high for a helicopter to comfortably top. Ashes from burned grass, propelled upward thousands of feet above ground level (AGL) by convection currents, soared past my cockpit. At sixty to seventy knots forward speed, large charred material suddenly and noiselessly brushed the windscreen, causing me to instinctively duck. Even anticipating debris strikes, the sudden impact of strips of burned material stimulated an inadvertent reflex and made me feel extremely foolish.

Whether admitting it or not, every low-flying small bird pilot encountered trouble navigating and accomplishing missions during the smoky season. Many pilots were reluctant to talk about such experiences, but no one was immune from becoming temporarily disoriented. Of course, the end result was the ultimate measure of success.

MARIUS

Our newest Captain, Marius Burke, began flying solo pilot during the hot, smoky season. After being upgraded, Marius worked in Bangkok for a month, and was then dispatched to Long Tieng on 7 April. In one of the worst periods for a newbie to be turned loose upcountry, like those of us before him, he learned many on-the-job lessons of difficult mountain flying the hard way.

It was not easy. Through atypical incidents, Burke encountered interesting experiences during his first smoky season. Case Officer Tony Poe had sent him to a Meo position around MOUNG HEIM (VS-48) during the height of the smoky season. Without benefit of a guide, he managed to arrive in the area. Plagued by low visibility, he sallied north up the valley, and estimated a point to turn into the landing zone. Unable to locate the pad, reversing course, he flew down the valley. Then, discovering a grass strip, he landed. Soldiers on the ground were surprised to see an uncommon green H-34. Eventually finding a man who spoke passable English, Marius inquired about the location of his intended destination. The individual climbed into the left seat and directed Burke to the correct position. After landing, Marius noted with some satisfaction that despite the smoke and his unfamiliarity with the area, he had missed the original site by only 1,000-feet. Feeling good about his success, Marius dropped the man off at the MOUNG HEIM strip and returned to The Alternate.

During a debriefing, Marius related that he had a difficult time finding the pad because of the poor visibility and that he had landed at MOUNG HEIM. He continued that the people on the ground helped him accomplish the mission, and he considered them very friendly. Hearing this, Poe became highly agitated, almost going ballistic and shouting, "*That is a Neutralist site.*" Even though cooperating with the FAR on the Plain of Jars and with Meo forces in the Xieng Khouang Ville area, remote dissident splinter groups in limbo were in the process of switching over to the government umbrella, or were still unsure of which side to back. Tony considered the MOUNG HEIM Neutralists nothing but enemy scum, definitely not trustworthy individuals like the Meo. The revelation shook Burke. Looking back on the incident later, he considered the incident an item of fate; he was certainly at

the right place at the right time that day. Had the encounter occurred during an earlier period when the Neutralists were aligned with the bad guys, he might have encountered severe problems.

Burke's smoky season on-the-job-training (OJT) continued. Not long after the Moung Heim incident, he was assigned to supply an elevated pad near Phu Bia. On approach, he failed to maintain a proper sight picture and rate of closure that involved judging ground speed. Too slow to maintain flight, he lost translational lift, and settled toward the landing zone. As the main gear contacted the lip of the pad, he reduced the collective to regain RPM, pushed full right rudder pedal to reverse direction, and successfully dove away from the precipice. After safely gaining air speed, he had time to think. The incident badly frightened him and he never duplicated the error.

Later, while attempting to emulate more experienced peers, and to please the Customer, he rolled off the Long Tieng strip with a heavy load. Attempting to cross Padong Ridge at a low level, he became engulfed in a severe leeward downdraft. With no air space in which to turn, and fully committed, he conducted a somewhat normal landing to a chance opening on the wooded ridge without damaging the aircraft. ³

CASE OFFICER SHUFFLING

Over time, Vint Lawrence had been feeling increasingly unwell, and had lost his appetite. By the end of the first week in March, he became feverish, unable to hold food down. After characteristic yellowing eyes indicated signs of jaundice, and

³ Marius Burke Interview, 5/30/98.
Marius Burke Email, 06/21/98.

other negative physiological signs emerged, he made his way to Bangkok for a medical examination. He was promptly diagnosed with hepatitis and hospitalized. After treatment requiring total bed rest and decent food, Vint recovered somewhat. With so much left undone upcountry, he wanted to return to Long Tieng, but USG regulations required that he return to CONUS for additional medical tests. Consequently, Lawrence did not return to Laos for several months.

Mike Lynch, who had joined Tony and Vint at Long Tieng to assist in the Military Region Two expansion, also contracted hepatitis. He was hospitalized in April for two months, and then went to the States to recuperate. He returned to Laos in February 1965, but did not return to work at Long Tieng until May.^{4 5}

Vint's illness left counterpart Tony Poe in charge to interface with Vang Pao, of whom he was not particularly fond, to oversee PARU trainers and motivate Meo warriors. During Vint's government-enforced absence, along with a new assistant, Terry Burke, Poe also had to act as air boss and oversee or dispatch flights.

Field agent Poe's credentials were many and varied. I did not know his true surname, Poshepny, until he showed me an ID cover card one day. Names really did not matter to us, only the individual's actions. After forming rapport, we only learned

⁴ Roger Warner, *Shooting at the Moon: The Story of America's Clandestine War in Laos* (Vermont: Steerforth Press, 1996) 118-119. Leary, 1965 Notes, UTD.

⁵ Hepatitis was another of the numerous endemic diseases common to Southeast Asia. Before I arrived in the Theater, some in our group had contracted hepatitis. As a prophylaxis, weekly injections of 2ccs gamma globulin were administered by employees in the Air America clinic. Produced by Japanese pharmaceutical companies, the serum was expensive, so the company expanded the injections to monthly, and then as our health conditions improved, to semi-annual doses. As a result, the incidence of the debilitating disease greatly diminished.

about some of our co-workers' backgrounds in stages. A teenage Marine during the bloody battle for Iwo Jima, Tony had also distinguished himself with the CIA as a paramilitary specialist in Korea, Indonesia, and with Tibetan warriors. Poe was already a legend among us pilots for his extraordinary field prowess, bravery, and burning desire to win the day. He was the consummate Marine PPK.⁶ Reputed to be an avid, self-avowed communist hater and enthusiastic killer, the iron tough warrior was generally feared and respected, as his word could determine if a pilot worked for him or not. Being banned from functioning in his area of operation carried death knell implications for a helicopter pilot, as his locus of responsibility revolved around Long Tieng, and there were few other areas in Laos where a pilot could work. With diminishing returns, a black ball dropped in the voting box could easily lead to the loss of one's job.

TERRY BURKE

When both Vint and Mike Lynch departed for Bangkok and then the States to recover their health, Terrence M. Burke was inserted to supplement the Long Tieng program. Terry had previously applied for upcountry work, but his marital status, that included a child, dissuaded his bosses from initially granting the assignment.

After serving as a U.S. Marine Embassy guard in Rome, former sergeant Burke joined the Agency in 1961, originally working in the security section. Advancing in the organization, the intelligent lad landed in the Thai-Burma-Lao Branch of the Special Operations Division at Agency Headquarters Langley, Virginia. After receiving paramilitary training at the "Farm,"

⁶ PPK: Paid professional killer, a humorous acronym I first heard during a field lecture by my platoon gunny sergeant at Quantico, Virginia.

in mid-1963 he was assigned to the U.S.-Thai intelligence center at Nong Khai, Thailand, under a blanket cover of assisting the Thai Border Police. The center received coded messages from project teams in Laos, reporting on enemy locations and activities, friendly locations, and hostilities. The majority of messages received requested rice and ammunition airdrops. The center's mission was to assess incoming reports and forecast enemy movement.

By the fall of 1963, feeling deskbound like other peers in the office, Terry thirsted for a more active operational role. By then, he had derived substantial knowledge of the Lao "big picture," but only from second-hand reports and dots on charts. AB-1 giants Bill Lair and Pat Landry noted his creditable work. Easing him into field work, they assigned him to Nakhon Phanom (NKP) for two months, to replace the paramilitary officers departing on home leave.

His initial assignment there was to establish a Lao trail watch program from Nakhon Phanom. The work involved assembling and marshaling three-to-four man trail watch teams in central Laos, charged to create vantage points to observe, photograph, and report on enemy traffic along the numerous eastern logistic trails from North Vietnam to South Vietnam. Since he was not supposed to enter Laos, the program was difficult to monitor, and he suspected much of trail reporting information was bogus. Also, despite a deficiency in his Thai-Lao language fluency, he understood a sufficient amount to realize that his orders between the Thai officers and the low-land road watch teams were often distorted. Unhappy with the overall results, although forbidden to accompany the teams, he still did on occasion. At such times, he noted little movement along a trail in question, only a few trucks and elephants. Consequently, a bit frustrated,

he was happy to relinquish control of the program to the two returning officers.

Vint's bout with hepatitis and untimely absence from Long Tieng left a formidable vacuum in interpersonal relations with Vang Pao and his officers. There was simply no one possessing an equivalent caliber to replace him. Despite Burke's lack of field experience and language deficiency, much to the displeasure of more senior spooks, the two Udorn-based AB-1 chiefs settled on the young man to fill the Lawrence gap. This assignment would represent the first Agency Case Officer sent permanent-change-of-station (PCS) to Laos. Because Terry would enter the country "in the black," undeclared, without cover or documentation, his assignment had to be approved by the Vientiane Agency Chief of Station (COS) and high-ranking Langley officials. Since Terry's family resided in Udorn, he would continue to use the cover that he was working for the Thai border police.

Tony would retain site boss status, but Bill Lair, "the brains behind the whole thing," planned to visit the site frequently to maintain the extraordinary relationship Vint had developed with Vang Pao. During Vint's years at Long Tieng, the Princeton University graduate's reputation had reached legendary proportions, with his uncanny ability to communicate with the general and to initiate "civic action" type projects. Over time, Lawrence tactfully labored to influence Vang Pao in functioning as both a military commander and a civic leader, concerned as much about his peoples' economic means as their wartime safety. Vint's sudden departure created a large void in the program and Terry Burke quickly realized that he did not possess the proper background or language skills to interact with Vang Pao in a similar manner, so he deferred to Poe and Lair's requirements--something he indicated that Lair had foreseen.

Tony was drinking very heavily at the time of Burke's arrival. Sometimes difficult, an achiever and not a teacher, Poe gave Burke little mentoring or direction, so Terry concentrated on learning more about Military Region Two, keeping the air distribution program going, and attempting to become more involved in purely military matters. Sleeping in the operations hut with RONing pilots, he initially coordinated the dawn-to-dark air operations that supported Vang Pao's headquarters and field elements throughout his region. This entailed working with PARU and Meo air operations designees to ensure that Air America and Bird STOL fixed wing and H-34 aircraft were loaded with the correct ammunition, rice, and passengers, and that the pilots were briefed on various aspects of the mission sites. Because he was so conscientious and diligent, over time, Burke became one of the most favored principals at Long Tieng with us pilots. He soon discovered which pilots he could rely on to accomplish a job and those he could not.

Later, Jack Cahill was assigned to Long Tieng to assume the air operations duty.

During the spring of 1964, when the work load increased and enemy units began movement on the Plain of Jars and in Sam Neua Province, Terry began accompanying pilots to become familiar with both friendly and enemy sites in the Plain of Jars area. He noted that Meo defensive positions were little more than a series of trenches and thatched-roofed bunkers carved out of narrow ridgelines. In some locations, a small village housed families of the local soldiers. Rudimentary dirt strips or helicopter landing pads had been hacked out of dirt hillsides in unlikely locations. There were strips along the crest of ridges, in box canyons, and others that launched a plane into space off a ridge terminus.

At first, his range of operations extended to the eastern region at Phou Nong, which he visited just after the Meo lost, and then recaptured the site. After departing the helicopter, he dove into a former enemy gun position and afterward felt foolish, as the hole could have contained an anti-personnel mine. He eventually ranged into Sam Neua province and became familiar with much of that area. ⁷

INTO THE NORTH

Mike Marshall waited for me at the strip to commence a two-aircraft flight to Houa Moung (VS-58) in upper Military Region Two. ⁸ Without really knowing exactly where I had been, I had flown there late the previous year with Tony during a momentous flight.

On that particular cool autumn morning in 1963, Tony had surprised me upon return from a local hop. Waiting for me at the loading area, he shouted to me to top off, as we were going north on a long flight to Houa Moung. Then he disappeared into the thatched administration hooch, and came out a few minutes later with a couple of Thai and Meo men. While I waited for the Flight Mechanic to refuel, I observed Tony. He was shaped like a large 200 pound barrel, and reminded me of a former boxer or professional football player. Accentuating his fierce, unkempt appearance, he wore green fatigues and a holstered revolver on a web belt. Covering his prematurely balding pate was a greasy looking wide brimmed leather hat, festooned with campaign pins and medals accumulated over the years.

⁷ Terry Burke Emails, 02/20/04.
 Terry Burke Reply to Author's 02/21/04 Questions.
 Terry Burke *Early Days* Manuscript.
 Bill Leary 1964 Notes, UTD.
 Mike Marshall, Emails, 08/14/99, 08/25/99.

⁸ Upper Military Region Two: The area north of the Plain of Jars to the border.

I had never flown with the big man before and, except to observe him occasionally from the cockpit, rarely had time to seriously converse with him. Naturally, I wanted to make a good impression on the wild-looking guy during that first flight. I realized that the trip offered me a choice opportunity, as I would have a chance to learn a new work area and at the same time possibly make a few points with a primary Customer. I was not particularly worried about going to a new site, for the former Marine had an excellent reputation with the pilot force as a person who could be completely trusted, and would never direct a man to a site or area unless it was considered safe. If there was any doubt about security, he would accompany the pilot. As a relatively new guy experiencing a new area in 1963, I appreciated all the help I could get either navigating or avoiding enemy areas.

I cranked up and nervously waited for the burly man to enter the left cockpit seat. After satisfied with the disposition of the load and passengers, he positioned himself, enveloping the left portion of the cockpit. When he directed an elfin grin toward me, I detected a whiff of booze from his mouth, but shrugged it off, as certainly no one drank in the morning.

At cruise altitude, we surged northward between Xieng Dat and Moug Soui, then flew well west of the Plain of Jars past Phou So and then turned north toward Phou Vieng. We no longer directly crossed the western Plain because of an increased threat of AAA fire from vehicle-mounted guns, and enemy patrols infiltrating and harassing Neutralist camps at Moug Phanh and Moug Kheung. Like I had done with Wayne in January, we turned northeast between Site-6 and Phu Cum (VS-50) and paralleled the Nam Khan. Visibility seemed to improve the further north we



Defining spike at Phu Cum (Site-50) that poked through the clouds.
Author Collection.

flew, probably because of a reduction of the population, and the strange agricultural methods employed.

Generally following river systems, we turned north toward our destination. Thus far, since I had previously flown over the area, my navigation had been fairly accurate so that Tony did a minimum of pointing. In fact, while I concentrated on flying and navigating, there was little conversation and he appeared to doze. Like any good "General Direction," just when I needed help, he awoke, grunted, pointed, and then slumped his head against his chest again. Leaving the river valley flatlands, we arrived at a point where I really did not want to look down, for there were no visible forced landing areas in the rough undulating, vegetated hills. Higher mountains loomed ahead of me and I considered asking Tony if I should track right or left of them.

Suddenly the helicopter began to pitch and vibrate with coordinated cyclic movement. Highly sensitized to any minute change in normal aircraft sounds or motions, my body and mind immediately assumed a fight or flight mode. As I was not grasping the control stick, I first considered an auto stabilization equipment (ASE) pitch channel malfunction, or a servo "hardover" to be the cause of the unusual movement. I certainly did not need an emergency situation in this remote, forlorn place. Then when I placed my right hand on the head of the black stick, I felt a series of small forward inputs, followed by the cyclic returning to the neutral position. It became evident that this movement was not electrical or mechanical, but a human-induced input. I looked to my left and observed my cockpit partner smiling, while playfully and

inexplicably systematically bumping the stick.⁹ Since I had never experienced similar behavior from a cockpit passenger before, I was surprised and confused, and really did not have a clue about what to do. No one had prepared me for this quirk in the boss man's character. Still grinning, he pointed to the left rear and said, "You know **they** were shooting at you back there." 'Back there' was quite a generalized statement. Therefore, I calculated that it had to be somewhere between the Mounng Heim Valley and Route-6. Perhaps he was right, but why did he let me fly over an enemy position, and why did he use such an unorthodox method of gaining my attention?

Cruising using an average radar altimeter setting above terrain calculated to be above the effective range of most small arms fire, I had seen or heard nothing. Of course, this method was not perfect to adequately clear changing terrain levels, particularly when crossing peaks and valleys at a constant altitude. Perhaps, when crossing a high hill, I was low enough for the indigenous "duck hunters" to aim and take a few pot shots at the big green, featherless bird. Then a thought occurred to me. Was there actually any ground fire, or was this man merely testing me to gage my reaction under faux fire? Anything was possible, for one never actually knew the true motivation of these often-devious clandestine types. Even though I did not know him well yet, Tony revealed a major segment of his character to me during that trip.

Regardless of the cyclic bumping implication and phantom shooters, I was pleased that Tony accompanied me through "Indian Country," and shrugged the foolish incident off as a childish foible, but part of my work description. Imbued with the special trust and confidence with which the Marine Corps indoctrinates

⁹ Stick bumping was a Poe "idiotsyncrasy" that became Tony's trademark and would perplex some pilots for years.

its trainees, I trusted Poe implicitly, and believed that he would never consciously allow harm to befall me. From that day forward, I never had occasion to doubt his word, and our Customer-pilot relationship nurtured, grew, and lasted for many years. This continued to be the case long after we departed the Lao battlefields.

Within fifteen minutes, we arrived at the grassy Houa Moung airstrip. Tony disembarked and charged off toward the top of the hill, indicating that he was remaining there overnight. With the assistance of a Meo guide, I went east to Ban Song (VS-29), took my hit as previously reported, and managed to return to Sam Tong without further incident.

HISTORY

Located on a high ridge, the Houa Moung airstrip lay astride a major trail designated Route-6 that wound south from Sam Neua City to join major Route-7 in the Ban Ban Valley. The strategic site served as the central FAR base of operations in Houa Phan Province during the RLA and Meo guerrilla expansion period.¹⁰ Complementing other remote government positions, Site-58 passively interdicted the disused road, and served as a forward listening post to monitor enemy movement south into Xieng Khouang Province. It also functioned to logistically support sites to the east, and to launch guerrilla raids on enemy lines of communication (LOC).

There was another minor bypass trail and footpaths several miles to the northeast, which better served enemy logistics movement. Rarely maintained, arteries like this were almost impossible to spot from altitude because of disuse and tangled jungle. They were also virtually impassable to any vehicle

¹⁰ Normally, no one used the correct terminology Houa Phan, therefore, the province was commonly referred to as Sam Neua.

during the rainy season. From time to time, during small-scale actions the communists cleared out small nests of RLG troops in areas where they needed to operate, and left other more formidable government bastions such as Houa Moung alone.

During the early days, when the war basically involved only Pathet Lao units coupled with Vietnamese advisors, coordinated RLG action in the province was left to regular Lao troops. By 1963, FAR leaders assumed a greater interest in Sam Neua, and gradually cobbled together three mixed Lao-Meo-Lao Theung volunteer battalions from stragglers believed exterminated when the provincial capital was lost during September 1961. ¹¹

Initially, the CIA and its upcountry Case Officers Vint Lawrence and Tony Poe had no part in forming the RLG partisan resistance operation in Sam Neua. It was strictly a FAR-conceived and inspired operation, largely a creation of Military Region Two Commanding Officer, General Kham Khong Budavong. Long Tieng's involvement was limited to training and supporting ADC troops assigned there by Vang Pao (like at Hong Non) to interdict selected roads and report on enemy movement. Early lack of control in Sam Neua constituted a major frustration for Vang Pao, whose military rank only initially matched FAR commanders. Leaders received orders from, and answered to, the FAR Vientiane General Staff and, to a certain extent, the Luang Prabang headquarters (the forward location controlling supplies at the time). Except for supplying, monitoring, and maintaining PARU intelligence teams, such as the ones located at Hong Non and a few scattered ADC sites, the CIA was not actively involved in the northern FAR operation. The Agency did not fully support it until after General Phoumi was overthrown in an early 1965

¹¹ Volunteer Battalions: From the French, Bataillon Volontaire. However, as in BV-27, the acronym BV prevailed.

coup attempt, General Kham Khong was jailed, and General Vang Pao was elevated to the commanding officer of Military Region Two. The exception to Vang Pao and his advisors' control of troops and operations in Military Region Two was FAN, whose overall control responsibility continued under FAR Vientiane.

LAO LEADERS

FAR Majors Kham Sao Keovilay and Tong Vongrasamy were the designated BV-26 and BV-27's commanding officers in the province. Both competent leaders, they answered directly to Major General Budavong at Paksane. Kham Kong, considered a good old boy in the Vientiane hierarchy, had administrated the Dong Hene officer training school in Military Region Three before assuming military command of Military Region Two. Kham Sao and Tong were two of his favorite students in the class. Naturally, when he elected to develop the northern partisan operation, he selected Kham Sao, Tong, and nineteen other staff officers from Vientiane to implement the plan. All 1,000 enlisted men were recruited from various ethnic groups within Sam Neua Province. By informal agreement between Kham Kong, Kham Sao, and Tong, the suave Kham Sao was designated the chief politico and administrator to mobilize and interface with the region's civilian population. Tong, a quintessential fighter, handled the provincial military aspects of the war. Mainly through basic air support, these forces, spurred on by Tong, had long before reestablished a government presence deep inside enemy-controlled territory. Starting with a core of local supporters at Houa Mung, like an amoeba, they spread out and flowed into areas or "no-man's-land," where enemy presence was considered thin, and ethnic populations receptive to government recruiting. This movement tended to offset the permanent population losses north

and south of Ban Ban, when people left to resettle around Sam Tong and Long Tieng.

Tong, whose father was reputed to be an Ubon Thai, was known as a very complex individual. He was considered extremely brave and loyal to the government cause: a patriot who believed that his homeland, the villages, families, and people must be protected at all costs, especially from unfriendly extraterritorial forces. Like Kong Le and other charismatic leaders, he alleged that he possessed special protection from spirits, and would never be physically harmed or killed. This philosophy served him well until mid-1965, when he succumbed from wounds incurred from a military SAR mission in North Vietnam.

Tong's wife lived at Sam Tong. The couple was unable to procreate. This was a difficult face issue for Tong, given the emphasis on the society's conception of manhood. At least one individual who knew him well believed that sub-consciously, the fact he could not father children caused him to prove his worth in other ways, such as in his leadership qualities and extraordinary battlefield ferocity. Setting an example, unable to tolerate sloppiness, he demanded and obtained disciplined and efficient soldiers in his organization. Exaggerated tales of his exploits later contributed to many posthumous stories, myths, and the enduring Tong legend.

Kham Sao's elevation to a regional administrator proved an excellent selection, for he was a true nationalist. Considerably more polished than Tong, he was just as dedicated and brave, but without a manliness problem. He was a hands-on person, who resented the fact that top Lao military staff resided in Vientiane accomplishing nothing, as parts of the country were lost to the aggressors. He especially did not get along well with General Phoumi, or particularly respect him.

Sam Neua's partisan FAR unit commanders reported to Kham Khong's official Paksane headquarters. However, neither civilian nor military operations ever originated from that location. This was identical for all existing supply channels. Large troop concentrations were generally supplied and paid through a RLA system. After delivery to Laos from Udorn, arms and ammunition were distributed to northern sites, mostly from Luang Prabang. Two Udorn AB-1 Case Officers stationed at the royal capital were charged with managing FAR logistics. Delivery of arms and ammunition to BV-26 and 27 in Sam Neua was the responsibility of the Royal Lao Air Force, which later included helicopters and T-28 support. An ancient C-47 allocated for Kham Khong's use from Luang Prabang delivered fresh meat and vegetables, sugar, fish sauce, booze, and cigarettes to boost troop morale. The payroll was dispatched from Paksane, minus ten percent of the gross amount to cover officers' local expenses. By the time field officers took their ten percent cut, there was very little left for the troops to spend.

Attempting to conform to Geneva Accords protocols, from the time of the implementation in 1962 until early in 1965, fearing capture and worldwide censure, Ambassador Unger and his successor William Sullivan theoretically restricted Tony and Vint's activities to Xieng Khouang province. Officially banned from working in Sam Neua, of course, the agents' entry was never announced or acknowledged.

Early AID operations in Sam Neua were considerably different from that of Long Tieng. Area Coordinator Pop Buell and Sam Tong had full control of refugee movements and relief there. Therefore, Buell, and later Jiggs Weldon, were officially permitted into the area for refugee humanitarian purposes.

A few months after Doctor Weldon arrived in country, Pop escorted him to the embassy to request permission for the doctor

to actively assist him in Sam Neua. Ambassador Unger reluctantly approved the request with the observation, *"Well, if you two fellows are ever captured, I do not expect the enemy could make much political hay from an old Indiana farmer and a gray-haired country doctor."*¹²

Within the operational Sam Neua area, there were numerous Meo and other tribal clans which had long become disaffected with communists and their high-handed methods. They were ready and willing to resist them. However, they required the where-with-all to do so. Indeed, the people had hated the Vietnamese from the beginning of their entry into Laos.

Utilizing Helio Couriers and H-34 helicopters for transportation and supply, USAID activities at Hua MOUNG mainly centered on answering the immediate needs of both civilian and military by interfacing with their leaders on a day-to-day basis. This helped to ensure delivery of food, medical supplies, personnel, clothing, blankets, pots and pans, transportation, and to relay problems to regional headquarters at Paksane or Vientiane. It was a difficult task, as there were never enough supplies or aircraft available to meet the needs.

Out of sheer necessity within the precarious area, an ad hoc committee consisting of Khamsao, Tong, Mrs. Khamsao, the Chao MOUNG of Hua MOUNG, the Chao Tassang of Houa MOUNG, Mrs. Chao MOUNG, Mrs. Chao Tasseng, with Pop and Doc as ex-officio members later added.¹³ When important decisions were required, all the parties delivered their opinions, but Khamsao and Tong reserved the right of final determination. However, the three

¹² The quote is what Edgar Buell attributed to Ambassador Unger, and then only when Pop discovered that he could use it to good advantage.

¹³ Chao MOUNG: Government district officer.
Chao Tasseng: Government canton chief. A canton was a division of a MOUNG, a district of a khoueng, or province.

women--always intelligent, tough, and crucial to the success of the program--were key figures in the deliberations. Their mere presence made a significant impact within the community at the time. There was a downside though. Women serving as political advisors were not normally accepted in Lao society. However, the fact that they supported the overall cause allowed them access to the C-47, which delivered their goods required to operate their village shops, and allowed the ladies to amass substantial wealth. All the AID field workers knew about the situation and received complaints from the population, but it was generally overlooked. That was life in Southeast Asia.

Later, stretched thin with overwhelming refugee relief work, Pop sent IVS worker Blaine Jensen to a site in Sam Neua with the last load of relief supplies. His task was to ensure that the supplies were secure and to inform officials that Pop would arrive in two days to distribute the goodies. While there, a young American arrived from Luang Prabang with a load of ammunition. Irate, believing Blaine worked out of Long Tieng, the man inquired what was he doing there, and proceeded to give him a considerable ration of sierra. He said Sam Neua was his exclusive area, took Jensen's name, and told him to leave. That night, AB-1 Udorn forwarded a complaint to Long Tieng concerning the perceived infraction. The following day, Vint journeyed across the hill to discuss the issue with Pop. As a result, a rebuttal message to Udorn simply stated that the Sam Tong personnel were only providing necessary relief, and would continue to do so whenever they believed it necessary. The crew at Luang Prabang resented what they perceived as AID dabbling in their area of responsibility, and there was contention until the issue was finally resolved. ¹⁴

¹⁴ It was sort of like breaking the proverbial Chinese rice bowl.

HOT SPRINGS

When working upcountry together, Pop, Thongsar, and Jiggs Weldon occasionally over-nighted at Houa Moung. Whenever they departed Sam Tong with Ed Reid, Bill Cook, or other preferred senior pilots, and I was present, I felt a twinge of envy, for as a junior Captain I was never assigned to make the trip. There was probably a good reason. Older, respected pilots, with more experience upcountry, could be relied on and were more readily trusted by the Customer, than one still learning the area. This was initially a problem, given the little flying we performed at the time. However, with the advent of friendly expansion into uncharted, undeveloped areas, this attitude gradually changed. It just required time and patience to gain the Customer's confidence.

With stories circulating about the benefits of the hot springs, the finest Lao Lao in the country, and the enjoyment the Customers had there, the site achieved legendary proportions. It became an unattainable mystical place that I believed I would never see. Of course, it was probably my fault, for I was not a card player, did not talk like Pop, nor was I considered a good old boy in the old man's eyes. ¹⁵

The trips north were not only calculated to show the flag and deliver supplies, but also fulfilled a need for recreation. There were a couple of hot springs in the province frequented by AID workers and their pilots--one at the Lao village of Moung Yut, in a river valley southeast of Phu Pha Thi, while the other was at Houa Moung, which the Americans preferred. In comparison to Site-58, the Moung Yut warm springs were small, where an

¹⁵ I discovered early in life that I was not a lucky or astute gambler.

individual had to sit close to the source to obtain a satisfactory warming effect.

On one occasion, Billy Zeitler and Scratch Kanach flew Pop and Tongsar to Houa Moung to RON and to celebrate a Meo holiday. It was Billy Z's first experience with such festivities. Naturally, during VIP visits, the village leader always provided the finest hospitality the village could muster.

To help celebrate any such occasion, there were always large ceramic jars of rice wine present. During the feasting, obligatory games would commence. According to custom, visiting dignitaries were obligated to drink the fermenting rice wine in a contest against the local women. Curiously, the men did not participate. The theory behind the tradition was to produce drunken foreigners and then make sport of them. Initially, one pushed a long rattan straw through the solid mash and rice husks to create a well point at the bottom of the jar. Then at an appointed signal, one was supposed to suck the liquid. While the men hurriedly consumed the brew, ladies poured water into buffalo horns and prepared to introduce it into the jars in proportion to the amount drunk. Initially, the girls paused to observe the decreasing levels. As levels diminished, they topped off the jars, and others began participating next to the other contestants.

As a former pre-medical student, Billy Z was naturally concerned about the hygienic qualities of the nasty-looking brew. Therefore, exhibiting caution over convention, upon observing participants sucking up the suds, he blew what he carefully delivered to his mouth back down the straw into the vessel. Scratch, not as clever or devious as Bill, kept ingesting the potent mixture while Zeitler continued faking the process. His ploy was not discovered, and he never informed Scratch what he had done. Thinking alcohol would normally kill

all germs, Bill was not fully aware at the time of the danger of adding unboiled, and most certainly contaminated, water to the unappetizing mixture. He forgot that as alcohol was consumed and then diluted by additional water, any actual medicinal effect was negated.

The Moung Yut hot spring was not equal in size, or as warm as the one at Houa Moung. At the latter hot springs, a good-sized stream, the Nam Neun, was located below the foot of the ridge, considerably below the airstrip and village. A trail down from the village was nearly vertical and a quick round trip required almost two hours. The military and local officials maintained their headquarters at the strip. The hot springs copiously bubbled from the ground on the edge of the stream closest to the airstrip and village. Water was very hot close to the source, but without a discernable odor of hydrogen sulfide that one might expect from such vigorous hydrothermal activity. Because hot water flowed directly into the stream, one could easily move closer to the source or further away to obtain or moderate any degree of heat desired. Pop claimed that the spring was his most favorite spot. He often said you could work your butt off all day and then go to the hot springs to soak and relax. ¹⁶

Our trip to Houa Moung was not unduly hampered by smoke and haze. That would come later. After we landed and cargo was offloaded, a couple of local flights followed. Then, trying to conserve fuel at the site, each aircraft took on a barrel of 115/145 octane gasoline for the return flight south. While

¹⁶ Segment Sources:

Blaine Jensen Letters, 04/29/96, 05/01/96, 01/26/99.

Charles Weldon Emails, 02/09/97, 02/15/97, 11/21/99.

William Zeitler Taped and Transcribed Interview at Author's House, 09/01/01.

refueling was in progress, I strolled to an open-sided thatched structure at the upper end of the inclined strip. I suppose it represented progress, for I could not recall a building during my previous visit. The unassuming hooch was where most military activity took place. It housed a single side band radio, map table, and the ever-present coffee pot. One friendly and smiling soldier, who looked about as intelligent as a rough stone, was delegated to provide incoming personnel with a hot cup of java. Never aware of his name, and for want of something better to call him, over time, he became known to us simply as the "Coffee Man." We returned to Long Tieng with a load of sick, lame, or lazy individuals who generally dominated any flight south.

Mike was relieved and, as it was far too late for a local flight, Tony dispatched me to Sam Tong to spend the remaining daylight back hauling drums of helicopter and Helio Courier aviation gasoline to the fuel pit.

The phenomenon of a combination of morning fog in the river valleys, diminished visibility, reduced enemy action, and end of fiscal year budgetary restraints dampened flight time for the rest of the RON. Whatever local flying I accomplished was stressful, fatiguing, and produced considerable eyestrain during the period. These factors left me on the ground at Alternate between missions, waiting for pilot reports (PIREPS) relating to area visibility and further assignments. This respite allowed me to visit a little with Tony and other stiff wing pilots returning from field assignments, or from Vientiane, and members of the Thai PARU team.

LONG TIENG PARU

Following Vang Pao's transition from Pha Khao to a safer, more viable training base at Long Tieng, a small Thai PARU headquarters detachment was created at Udorn. A few men arrived

at Alternate by September 1962 to work with Vang Pao and Case Officers to train recruits and handle administrative details.^{17,18}

A second Thai team arrived during the first part of 1964. Even though many PARU were actually sergeants in the Thai police, when assigned to Laos, they were temporarily advanced to the rank of captain to enhance status among the locals. When the PARU first arrived, Vang Pao was suspicious of their motives and did not initially trust them. Therefore, for some time, both PARU and Meo maintained some distance from each other.

Along with Captain Dacha and others, Captain Macorn arrived in-country early. After surviving a harrowing four days in the bush with Air America pilots, Andy Glutting and Gooch, Customer Tom Fosmire, and Special Forces White Star advisor Carl Nagel in August 62, Macorn was selected to staff the first administration group at Long Tieng. Rashan was a point man among those in the second group.

In early 1964, Vang Pao dispatched representatives to local Meo villages to conscript men and youths to replenish his army. Over the months, his forces had taken serious casualties. Therefore, to restock his army, he lowered the age requirement for new recruits. As a result, a number of Meo elders questioned Vang Pao's wisdom and intentions. They also resented the Thai presence.

One village to the south of Long Tieng in the Long Pot area was luke-warm towards Vang Pao, his methods, and the war in general. ¹⁹ They not only disagreed with the conflict, they considered it someone else's war, but also refused to send their young men to Long Tieng for training. Vang Pao could not condone

¹⁷ For early PARU history see Author's Book One, Genesis.

¹⁸ Ken Conboy.

¹⁹ Meo villagers voted as a group and spoke with a single voice on important issues.

this stance. He needed men. If he allowed a clan to deny him recruits, other villages would surely follow suit and dry up his access to military personnel. Therefore, planning to establish an example, Vang Pao elected to personally retrieve recruits. Sensing danger, Vint was concerned for Vang Pao's safety, so he recommended that Vang Pao allow Captain Rashan to accompany him to complement his main bodyguard consisting of "Plug and other loyal relatives."

Rashan's presence on the trip actually went a little deeper than only Vang Pao's safety. Vint had initially received instructions from his AB-1 superiors, Bill Lair and Pat Landry, to have a PARU accompany Vang Pao to keep peace with their Thai counterparts at the Army 333 Udorn Headquarters.

A CIA-Joint Liaison 4802 Detachment (JLD) was formed at Udorn in late 1962 to support all paramilitary forces in Laos. This included Meo, FAR ADC units, and other tribal irregular groups. Even before JLD was established, CIA was responsible for cooperation with the Thai military and Royal Thai Government to provide covert aid to Laos. Headquarters 333 and JLD functioned as a joint U.S.-Thai command for military intelligence collection activities in Laos. One of the tasks included the use of PARU to train Meo, as road watchers and radio intercept operators. ²⁰

Although JLD possessed its own intelligence network, senior 333 officers were not satisfied, for they were charged by superiors to obtain information regarding Long Tieng activities from AB-1 sources. Consequently, they threatened to remove Thai PARU units from Long Tieng and other areas of Laos unless more pertinent information was immediately forthcoming from direct PARU sources.

²⁰ Joe Leeker, Military Aid, 21, 23.

As related by the H-34 Captain the following day, Vang Pao managed to strong-arm recruits into the helicopter. While in the process, more than a dozen armed villagers arrived and surrounded the helicopter. The men directed their weapons toward the general and ordered him to release their men and boy, or he would be killed. Observing the threat, Rashan leaped from the cabin section and stood in front of Vang Pao. Miraculously, no shots were fired. Trusting in Buddha and confident of his own safety, Rashan persuaded Vang Pao to re-enter the H-34 with the recruits and leave him at the village. Then, after arriving at Long Tieng, to turn the ship around and retrieve him.

In the aftermath of the incident, the Americans at Long Tieng and Sam Tong were convinced that Rashan had survived the event because Meo elders feared repercussions if they killed a Thai connected to the Long Tieng operation and the Americans.

Rashan's timely action quite possibly prevented Vang Pao's death, and a completely different aspect of the Lao war in Military Region Two. With a true warrior's rapport, Vang Pao was extremely impressed with the man's bravery. He never forgot the incident, and recounted the story a number of times over the years. The two men became close friends and Vang Pao offered Rashan a Meo wife, something he rarely did for anyone.

Because of his enduring respect for Rashan, Vang Pao allowed the Thai man to accompany him on all his future helicopter flights, and began trusting other PARU. After gaining the general's confidence, a full PARU team arrived at Long Tieng to complement the administration people already working there. Whereas Meo and Thai counterparts had previously been separate but equal while doing their own thing, this carefully selected team breached the invisible information barrier. For the first time, joint planning, overall coordination, and sharing expertise and resources were accomplished. It was the combined

opinion of knowledgeable Americans in the area that the failure of the Meo Military Region Two effort in 1974 would have transpired years earlier had the resolution to relations not occurred at this time. The new association did not leave the Vientiane Chief of Station out of the equation. He still weighed in on general policy, but not on operations in any particular region.

There was one exception to the acceptance of the new arrivals. Like the one bad apple in the barrel, one PARU advisor angered Vang Pao and was recalled. Failing to fit into the operation's mold, the Thai officer exhibited a haughty superiority complex, attempting to give orders, and tell Vang Pao and the Meo what to do. Since his father was a leading Thai general, it required a lot of fortitude and effort by Landry and Lair to remove him from the program. ²¹

Vang Pao's recruiting methods, intended to swell his army, occasionally bordered on the ruthless and extreme. One particular village, hoping to please everyone, provided warm bodies to both friendly and enemy factions. In Vang Pao's mind, this process had to cease and he decided that an example was required. Therefore, to force village elders to offer their sons to him and not to the Pathet Lao, Vang Pao planned a vicious attack in which the village would be burned and a few people killed. Since Marshall was available, Tony selected Mike to haul soldiers for the raid. Mike dissented, telling his mentor and friend that such an action was entirely wrong, and would only turn the people against Vang Pao's cause. Mike finally refused to participate in the attack, and frankly recommended that Tony

²¹ Blaine Jensen Letters, 08/13/96, 08/21/96, 03/04/97, 04/08/97.

get someone else for the bloody deed. It was not the last time Mike was backed up by Tony in matters of conscience. ²²

I walked a few paces off the loading-refueling ramp into the sprawling, unimpressive thatched administration-operations-warehouse building. At first glance, I determined it could have been designed by the identical architect and builders who erected Pop's warehouse at Sam Tong. The first item I spied on the right side after entering the door was the bubbling, smoke-blackened kettle that provided hot water for instant coffee and Ovaltine drinks, so essential to us Americans. A society-rejected handicapped youngster that Tony had befriended and declared his houseboy tended and maintained the hibachi fire and kettle. Besides cooking rice, he had few tasks other than keeping the pot full and boiling. After stirring a liberal amount of condensed milk into a glass of Ovaltine, I met Captain Macorn, a thin, handsome Thai, who wore several hats. I suspected that the friendly man was important, for he projected a command presence and worked at an uncluttered desk toward the front of the building. I was right. Mac provided the logistics expertise for the team and handled psycops. However, his main job was to ensure that Vang Pao possessed all the military supplies he needed. He was also in charge of teaching Meo training units the proper use of proffered material and its care. I liked all the PARU I worked with, but of all the English-speaking Thai based at Long Tieng, I liked Mac the best, as he was the friendliest and always attended to our basic needs. Perhaps Tony insisted on this, but like most Thai, Mac seemed genuinely hospitable. Other Thai worked in the rear. I

²² Mike Marshall Tape Responding to the Author's Questions, 04/08/90.

did not go back there, but could hear a clacking typewriter and the hushed voice of a radio operator.

SAM TONG

Toward evening, I popped over the hill to spend a few minutes repositioning fuel drums at Sam Tong. Approaching the strip, I noted a large apparatus that had been sitting on the left side of the complex for several years. It was a steel noodle-making device, donated for Meo use by a stateside church or civic association. Long before the machine arrived, Pop had informed USAID Director Charlie Mann that he could not use it. Despite the fact that the Meo were of Chinese extraction, they were a rice-eating people, who had no experience with noodles. Pop wasted his time, for the donating group went to their congressman, who in turn contacted USAID Washington. Predictably, the bureaucracy directed Mann to accept the gift for Sam Tong. USAID paid freight costs and arranged transportation for U.S.-donated items. Consequently, the machine arrived by Caribou and was offloaded. It was promptly discarded and had sat rusting in the mountain air ever since. Perched for all to see on landing approach, the monolith attested to American stupidity and ignorance of Meo customs and mores.

Years later, Mel Van Pearsam, who worked for World Vision, a missionary group based in California, arrived in Laos to perform work in Military Region Two. He worked in Vientiane with some ethnic refugee Lao women displaced from Sam Neua. As their husbands had been killed during the conflict, he searched for appropriate occupations they could pursue to support themselves. Learning about Sam Tong's disused noodle machine, he asked to acquire it, and the unit was flown to Vientiane. After some reconditioning, Mel paid a local noodle shop to teach the ladies how to manufacture noodles. As a result, they were able to

launch a small cottage industry, sell the product, and become self-sufficient. Therefore, the machinery that had been delivered to the wrong society eventually became a useful tool for needy individuals.

Lack of knowledge within Washington agencies fostered additional errors in the USG's quest to support the Lao refugee program. One was the introduction of bulgur wheat. AID workers at Sam Tong initially informed their superiors at Vientiane that they could not use the wheat, for the people did not consume that commodity. However, USAID Vientiane was under considerable pressure from Washington to use the product. There was U.S. surplus wheat available at no cost from the PL-480 Tithe 2 Program, and Thai rice was quite expensive. Therefore, Charlie Mann's USAID people insisted that Pop try using the wheat. The result was predictable. The Meo detested it and, unless actually starving, spat the unpalatable mess on the ground.

As a result, bulgur wheat bags piled up in the warehouse until an individual proposed the clever idea of feeding the unwanted wheat to local animals. When soaked in water, it made great pig food. Under U.S. law, AID workers were forbidden to feed the wheat to anyone but humans. Rationalizing that by feeding it to animals, it was better than allowing the shipments to sit and rot, after all the trouble and transportation costs from the U.S. to Sam Tong. The product did not go to waste, and eventually provided much needed protein for the refugees. When queried about the ultimate disposition of the bulgur wheat, Pop and his workers' official statement was that they distributed it to refugee families and had no control over its final use.²³

While we waited on the ground at Sam Tong for fog and low visibility to dissipate, Doctor Weldon arrived in a twin engine

²³ Blaine Jensen Letters, 09/27/96, 10/16/96.

Dornier driven by a Bird pilot. Previously, other than to say hello, or listen to Pop and Doc yak, because I did not know what to say, I never had an occasion to talk to him. Now, emboldened by tangible talking points, I approached Jiggs. My mother had recently sent me a newspaper clipping from her Maryville College, Tennessee, alma mater. It specified that a physician from the school was going to work for the Dooley Foundation in Laos at Khong Island. Initially under the impression that this was in Military Region One, she was a little concerned about his safety. Coincidentally, I had recently finished reading a Dooley book, *The Day They Burned the Mountain*. Because of this, and peer scuttlebutt, I was aware of the Dooley organization and its work in the north around Mounng Sing and Nam Tha. I had also received a little input from the Medic Chanh, who previously indicated that he had worked in one of the Dooley hospitals-- something later refuted by Jiggs. Doc, aware of Doctor Stanley's presence in country, indicated that he worked far downriver from Pakse at Kong Island, and was already struggling to contain and treat victims of a nasty cholera epidemic. After our brief conversation, I was happy that I had finally talked to Doc, who I found to be a very down-to-earth person, and not the pedestal-mounted individual I expected. Upon returning to Udorn, I wrote home and attempted to reassure Mom that the area Stanley worked in was reasonably friendly compared to the enemy held north.

BANG

On the twelfth, an indigenous air operations youngster at Long Tieng assigned "Pappy" Pascual and me to deliver supplies and passengers to Houei Sa An (VS-23), the same area where Tony and Dick Crafts had experienced land mine injuries. I had never been there before, but flying around "the horn" west of the Plain of Jars, using prominent checkpoints at Phu Sao, the Khan

River, Phu Vieng, and Bouam Long as reference, except for a little problem with smoke and haze, and with the help of a guide who was actually a passenger, I managed to arrive at the site. The village chief, another heavy, red-faced porcine type individual, looking much like other leaders I had seen before, wanted me to distribute the "hard rice" I had onboard to outposts. No one had forewarned or prepared me for such a requirement. Still, I wanted to help, and it was all flight time. After ascertaining that there was no spare fuel at the site, I calculated my time on station, factored in a liberal amount of fuel required for the return trip, and tentatively agreed to work a couple of pads.

With déjà vu precision, the scenario developed into a duplicate of the Ban Song incident the previous year. The head man spoke no English, possessed no map, and had no coordinates for me to plot. He merely grunted and pointed in a direction. There was no recognition signal mentioned, not even a standard white "T." When I attempted to query him about enemy locations, using the standard, "*where the bad guy*" and received a blank look, I began to have an unsettling feeling about the man's apparent lack of area knowledge, or familiarity with, the current situation. The more I searched for answers to my questions, the more frustrated and apprehensive I became. Deep in La La land, with probably no other aircraft within a hundred miles of us, and as PIC responsible for my crew and aircraft, it was a dangerous place for trouble. Was I about to be suckered again?

I did not have long to wait for an answer. With another so-called "guide" onboard, and a finger pointing north, we launched. Still confused as to our actual destination, I proceeded slowly at a low altitude toward a higher ridgeline. The worthless youngster was even more confused than me.

Furthermore, I do not believe he had previously flown in a helicopter, or encountered reduced visibility. The entire exercise became academic, for we were soon hit. By then, I was becoming experienced at recognizing ground fire, resulting hits, and the process of undertaking basic evasive action, i.e. get the hell out of there. In this case, I retraced the few miles to Site-23.

After shutdown, Pappy discovered a duck hunter's hole in the pylon, almost exactly in the same place as the hit incurred the previous year. Chief was not happy when I curtly refused to continue the charade. Indicating that I required fuel, I left for Sam Tong.

RTB

After one more shortened day working in the local area, I was recalled and flew Hotel-12 south to Udorn. Abe Rivero, leading a maintenance team to repair Charlie Weitz's ship, accompanied me home.

A human body, especially one's private parts, became especially funky and offensive smelling during five days of hard flying. This time, before departing Sam Tong for Udorn, instead of the pan splash bath I normally employed for my upper body, I gave a houseboy a few baht to haul a bucket of water from the stream about a mile downhill from the strip. Not pressured by the need to leave immediately, I wanted the luxury of an authentic, albeit cold, bath. When he returned, I went outside the hut and placed the bucket on top of a large concrete block. Climbing up to clear the ground muck, I carefully stripped completely naked. Then, sparingly using water and soap, I commenced a Navy bath. The word must have spread quickly. Before I was finished, it seemed like the entire village was gazing on my exposed, youthful, well-muscled body. The voyeurs mattered

little to me. I was not the least bit embarrassed, for I felt invigorated and clean for the first time in five days.

Despite the slow progress in completing additional guest rooms, school, and new bar, Ben Moore optimistically predicted an April pool opening. After considerable difficulty locating acceptable green tile in Bangkok, the product and other remaining items were purchased and awaited delivery. During my absence, the wooden forms had been removed from the sides of the pool. When I arrived in the compound, Dick Elder was on his hands and knees in the concrete hollow examining and tapping voids at the lower portion of the sides near the floor and wall joint. These cavities were created by Jack Connor's excessive use of the vibrator, which resulted in a glut of aggregate and not enough cement settling to the bottom. The holes would encourage leaks, and before the recently-purchased green tile was installed, the defects would have to be repaired. When I hailed Dick, he wanted me to climb down inside the mausoleum-like pit and help. Sick and tired of the project, I politely refused.

Soon after the final pour, I had decided to reduce my efforts in the pool project. Several factors influenced this decision. Sang was in the hospital and required monitoring. About two weeks after the removal of the ovarian tumor, she suffered coughing bouts and tore critical stitches, which had to be re-sewn. This extended her stay in her luxury suite to about a month. Other reasons for begging off pool work involved an aching back and a perceived grievance. Mainly, I was a bit miffed over the recently-erected sign crediting only three individuals (Dick Elder, Jack Connor, and Bill Lee) for the construction work. After my several months contribution, that did not seem quite right.

SEABOARD WORLD SERVICES

Another major item concerned me, which shifted concerns over completing a swimming pool to the back burner. One evening I was shocked to hear on the Voice of America (VOA) short-wave radio frequency that Air America was going to be replaced by Seaboard World Airways, a subsidiary of the sizeable and esteemed Seaboard World Airlines. I had never heard of this company, and no further details were divulged during the broadcast.

Since late November the previous year, International Control Commission (ICC) and leftist complaints against Air America presence in Laos had intensified. Many of the charges surfaced in international press releases. However, this was nothing new. After the 1962 Geneva Accords signing, a continued Air America presence in Vientiane had fomented a source of contention between various Lao factions, particularly Pathet Lao representatives. At the end of 1962, Soviet air supply wisely withdrew to Hanoi from the local area, leaving Air America as the only high visibility bullyboy in the country. Moreover, green H-34s passing through Wattay Airport always provided fodder for the leftists and triggered vivid images of U.S. aggression. Over time, Air America received excessive media attention in the world press. ¹

Publicity relating to Air America's replacement by another company in Laos was unveiled in the United States. Unknown to me, and to probably anyone else in our group, a 10 March *New York Times* newspaper article revealed that Air America, Inc. would soon cease operating in Laos. Seaboard World Services, an

¹ See Book 4 for Ambassador Unger and State Department dialogue concerning the geopolitical implications of switching to a new company.

affiliate of Seaboard World Airlines, was slated to assume all Air America contracts.

Citing an Air America spokesman:

"We will be shortly entering into a phase-out of our operations in Laos. We have long looked for an opportunity to concentrate our managerial efforts on the remainder of our business complex, and the Royal Lao Government, having located a suitable successor, makes it possible for us to accelerate this long desired change...The changeover would probably require 90 to 120 days after the arrival of Seaboard's representative..

Air America has primarily been involved with airdrops of supplies to refugees. This has been opposed by the Pathet Lao faction. The PL contends that Air America activities are a [CIA] cover for support of anti-PL forces."

A senior Vice president of Seaboard confirmed that his company had made proposals to the Lao government. Air America Chief Executive Officer (CEO) George Doole indicated that Air America would perform other contract services in Laos after the Seaboard takeover.

Another lengthy article published in the *Washington Daily News* on 23 March dealt with the subject of Air America terminating business. One interesting portion of the piece specified that the Pathet Lao had long alleged that Air America was a wholly owned subsidiary of the Central Intelligence Agency. ²

² According to the Author's anonymous source, the Seaboard Company, based in Miami, Florida, was an Air America counterpart for Central and South America operations.

It was interesting that some of my cancelled checks later written to Bird and Son for commissary goods shipped to The Alternate for the food fund were endorsed to Seaboard World Bank, San Francisco, California. However, any connection of Bill Bird to the airline or its roots is merely conjecture on my part.

The disquieting Slick rumor I had heard earlier on the Voice of America (VOA) broadcast station was still fresh in my mind. However, after no tangible action had evolved, we assumed that the deal was simply a political ploy, calculated to temporarily placate Lao centrists and leftist parties. In addition, the Agency was fond of periodically altering company names to confuse public controversy and obscure its intentions.

From all accounts, the latest revelation of the company change announced over VOA appeared complete. This was quite disturbing to us. Other than requiring a personnel and asset relocation from Udorn to Vientiane, but reflecting little overall change to the operation, no one in management presented many facts or details regarding the new policies involved in the changeover.

It was assumed that, as previously declared by Pathet Lao representatives, with any tangible change in Company status our employees captured during the September C-46 downing (Eugene Debruin, Thais, and Chinese) would be released. ³

More information followed. After a company change, Pathet Lao leaders demanded that the new outfit supply them along with the two other factions. Although not constituting a precedent,

³ White House Central Files, LBJ Confidential Files, LBJ Library, Austin Texas, Mike Forrestal, 03/19/64.
Professor Bill Leary 1964 Notes, UTD.

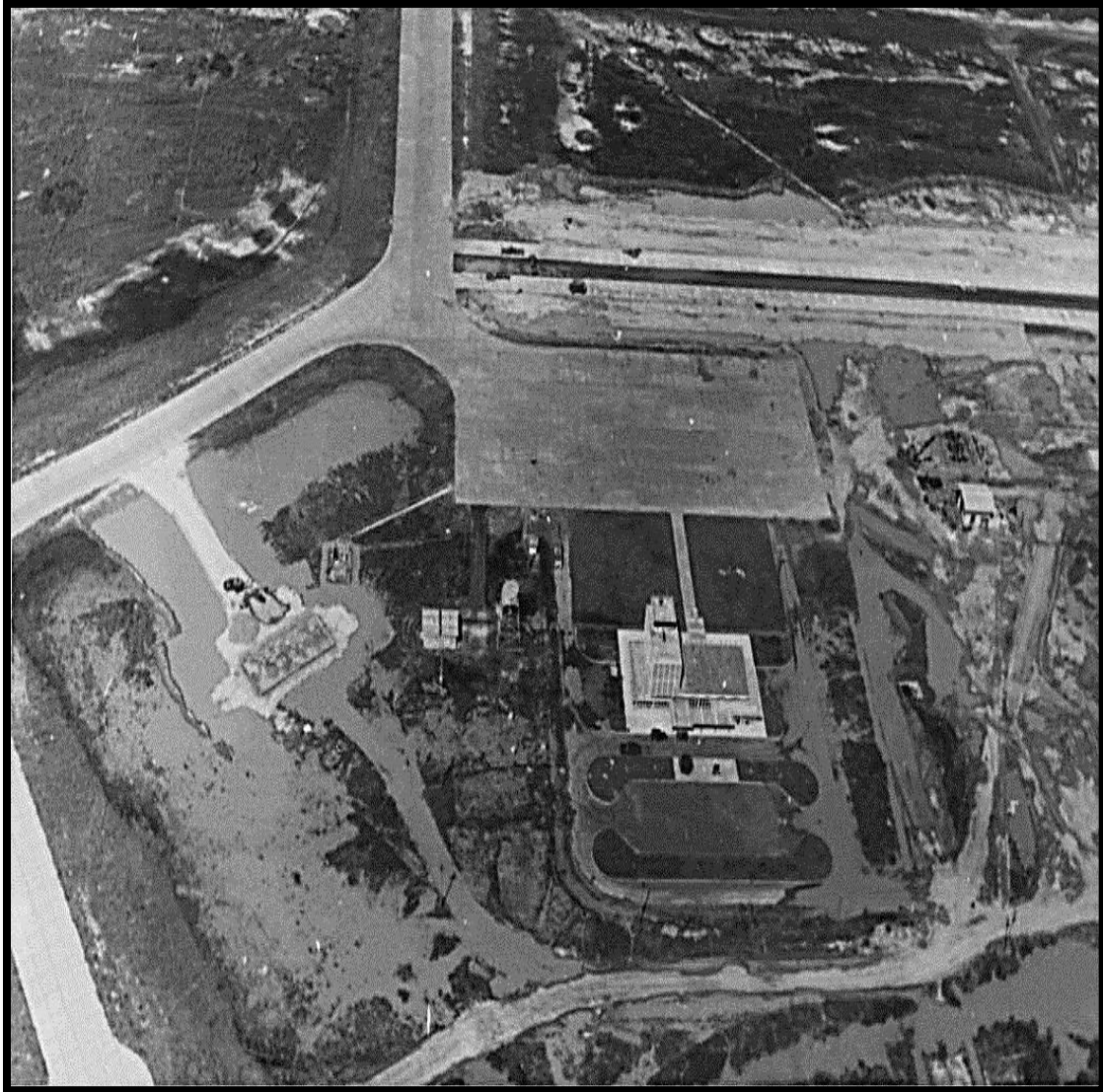
none of us believed USG would allow this to occur.⁴

Every year when contract renewal negotiations were conducted, similar unsettling rumors abounded and one did not know if he would have a job in the future. I was particularly affected, for, after the long hiatus as a First Officer, it seemed that I would never attain anything close to job security. Moreover, after acclimating to Udorn living, I was relatively comfortable and had no desire to relocate to Vientiane. Because of the turmoil surrounding us, until learning more about the situation, I decided to put off any thought of an early annual leave.

Other local factors tended to confuse the issue even more. The major airport expansion project under development for almost a year was nearly complete. One evening, Ben Moore captured a couple of us to accompany him to a Thai party celebrating and dedicating the nearly completed airport terminal. I really did not want to attend but went, not wishing to alienate my Base Manager. It was hosted by Royal Thai Air Force personnel, and I was introduced to the commanding officer of the base. However, as anticipated, the affair was stiff and boring, and we bowed

⁴ CIA Case Officer Don Courtney Email, 03/07/04, There were always explorations to discover alternatives to Air America. "Air America was owned and operated by the support side of the house [Agency], existing only to help the operations side of the house. At senior management levels, the support tail seemed to think that it was in charge of wagging the operation's tail."

Don served a few months at a Washington operations Laos desk attempting to coordinate and make the aviation aspect work. Air America was not the Agency's favorite airline. However, in the field where pilot and Customer were face to face, operations appeared to work well. At top levels, competition and the threat of it, stimulated all parties to be more responsive. For example, Bird and Son prospered by the fact that Dutch Brongersma was always ready to go with the right equipment at the right time, while Air America management was still waffling and arguing that the Agency really did not need the equipment.



The new civilian airfield tower, terminal, and concrete parking ramp at the Royal Thai Air Force Base Udorn, Thailand.

CJ Abadie Collection.

out after a customary drink or two. Ben seemed happy with our participation, and that was all that one could expect.

Since the military and political situations continued to deteriorate in both South Vietnam and Laos, I envisioned high performance jet squadrons would eventually be staged at Udorn. Certainly, the millions invested on airport renovations and upgrading would not be wasted. It all pointed to Udorn assuming the role of a strategic northeast hub for future military contingencies.

Unfamiliar faces arrived in the compound daily. Military types, some rumored to be an advance unit of the nineteen Air Commandos supporting a T-28 detachment, had already drifted into the area from Saigon. When Elder successfully coaxed me into installing a perimeter drain of perforated pipe, with nothing to do until the remaining members of his unit arrived, one enthusiastic young airman offered to help me with the work.

Up to 2,000 additional Americans were rumored to follow and participate in a joint Southeast Treaty Organization (SEATO) operation. There were also two USMC pilots assigned TDY for six months, for the purpose of training the first three RLAF pilots assigned to fly the H-34. ⁵

Patrons of the Rendezvous Club immediately felt the impact. Because of the requirement for additional Club supplies to accommodate the influx of new arrivals, Dick Elder had to increase Bangkok commissary food purchases. To ensure the safe delivery of all grocery items, he rode shotgun in the large Thai canvas-covered delivery truck.

⁵ John Pratt, *The Royal Laotian Air Force 1954-1970*, HQ PACAF, Directorate, Tactical Evaluation, Project *CHECO* Division, 12; (Reprinted by Dalley Book Service).

As additional people began flooding our area, rents charged for furnished houses soared once again. The immediate supply and demand equation portended negative implications for us old timers. We expected greedy landlords to soon begin pressuring and badgering us for additional rent money. Naturally, extra dollars flowing into the fragile economy would have an immediate inflationary impact on the entire population of Udorn. Because of the influx of "rich" Americans arriving in the city, with many more expected to follow, a U.S. Vice Consulate staffed by Gordon Murchie was supposed to locate in Udorn. Finally, several geologists arrived to obtain soil samples for a proposed Mekong River dam project. If proved feasible, a dam was planned upriver from Vientiane that would irrigate over two million acres in both countries.

MALAYSIA

There were investment designs within our own community. After several months of preparation, Jim and Bonnie Coble were well advanced on entrepreneurial plans to establish a concrete block company in Southeast Asia. On the advice of marketers, Jim originally wanted to locate a factory in Singapore's progressive environment, but, despite the potential, after further investigation and advice, he rejected that area in favor of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The political climate in Singapore was not ripe for foreign investment in cement blocks. The blocks manufactured in cottage industries there were inferior, and any superior blocks would constitute an infringement on local products and might cause people to lose their businesses.

With bilateral assistance from Trade International, a marketing company owned and operated by Australians, he journeyed to the cosmopolitan capital of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur. Long influenced and upgraded during British rule, the city was

clean and ultra-modern, and English was spoken as a prime language. Malaysia, touted as the most democratic and stable country in Southeast Asia, encouraged foreign investment by offering a five-year pioneer status for new businesses that offered no tax and free import privileges.

Jim was impressed with the country, its use of English law, and was in the process of registering Concrete Masonry, Limited, a limited partnership, with the Malaysian authorities. As company manager, with the help of the Besser Company and Australians, he planned to install an expensive Besser Vibropac machine (manufactured in Alpena, Michigan) at a location in the Kuala Lumpur area. With local government officials committing to the purchase of a substantial number of blocks, expectations were high for instant success and there was already talk of expansion. There was no reported local competition for cement blocks, and the nearest Besser machine was located in Bangkok. Coble and pilot investors would assume a majority financing in the company, resulting in a fifty-five percent controlling interest. Australian and local interests, to include influential sources, would provide the remaining funds or in kind payments providing land for the factory.

There was a strong motivation for a young man to invest in such a project, for it was mainly a conduit to achieve early financial success and security. Although we enjoyed flying helicopters, no one was enthusiastic about working over mountains, jungles, and hostile areas for an extended period. The odds of survival simply did not favor longevity. Several pilots, looking toward the future, were convinced that the project offered special merit and had already placed substantial funds with Coble. While discussing the project, Coble, an articulate person blessed with considerable blarney, was particularly convincing about the prospects. I had been

following the progress, and, after asking questions and showing interest, was invited to participate with my cash. However, I maintained the position that if something sounded too good to be true, it just might not be viable. Therefore, I remained cautious and chose to defer a decision to invest a hard-earned 10,000 dollars in the business until I could view the area, meet a few Malaysian principals, and observe Coble at work.

There was also another reason for me to wait. In conversations with other fixed wing and helicopter pilots, I discovered that many believed Jim was unduly controlled and influenced by his shrewd Chinese wife, and they were suspicious of her motives. Furthermore, Coble was abrasive, possessed a hot temper, and was not universally liked or trusted.

MAX WINN

While visiting Sang at Doctor Kassam's shoddy hospital, I encountered Tom and Kathy Moher, who were conversing with Max Winn and his Japanese spouse. Max, a high-ranking U.S. Army sergeant, held a microbiologist degree, and was on temporary loan from the SEATO Bangkok office to conduct research with Thai counterparts on the endemic lung and liver fluke disease prevalent in the northeast region.

A Southeast Treaty Organization (SEATO) cholera project established in Bangkok during 1959 was converted into a SEATO medical research laboratory that included the capacity for research in the broader field of tropical medicine. An outgrowth of this organization became the SEATO Clinical Research Center. The objective of this center was to conduct scientific studies on health conditions in Thailand and other countries in the

region, and to provide specialized training and management for treating tropical diseases. ⁶

Typifying the stereotype of a scientist, the tall, intelligent-looking man wore a flowing mustache. Still interested in medicine and laboratory work, I spent many happy hours talking with Max and his Thai counterparts about the work they were doing in educating the people about the long-term devastating effects of the many endemic diseases in the northeast region. With information covered a year or more ago in Doctor Ma's medical briefings, and during Gordon Murchie's forays into the hinterland, I knew a little about the life cycle of the liver fluke, and other damaging parasites that infected humans. Flukes proliferated in local klongs, or drainage ditches lining main roads. The flat worms invaded and developed in the snail's system, which were then eaten by tiny silver fish. After netting by fishermen, the infected fish were processed into the region's beloved uncooked fish sauce. Many autopsies confirmed that there was little doubt as to the flukes' ability to damage the liver and cause eventual death. Corroborating the findings, a twenty-year-old's pale organ rested in a large jar of formaldehyde on a shelf in the lab's foyer. It complemented other jars containing horrible-looking syphilitic fetuses, and other oddities, including a cyclops infant. The liver specimen displayed a perforated appearance with a few huge holes showing the worms' voracious appetite on a negligent human's body part.

For the most part, Isan's traditional food preferences were difficult, if not impossible, to alter. Over generations, northeasterners had caught and mashed up small klong fish into a salted brown concoction, generically called Nam Pla (fish sauce). They added this flavorful, but uncooked, supplement to

⁶ 1968 Thailand Handbook.

soups and other food. This particular version of fish sauce contained the active liver fluke. It was tastier and much preferred over the safer black cooked version. Never mind that the brew would eventually cause ill health and perhaps an early death. Using the uncooked version of Nam Pla was certainly consistent with ethnic Lao cooking--the northeast population was predominately derived from Lao stock--especially undercooked or uncooked meat. Everyone was aware that cooking destroyed the good taste all loved. For these reasons, Sergeant Winn estimated that despite SEATO's increased efforts to acquaint people with the fluke hazards, generations would pass before old habits would change.

Wearing several hats, Winn also claimed to possess a master brewer's degree. During some of our talks, an idea evolved that a grape-wine industry might be feasible in the hills of Laos and provide the Meo with some income. Tom obtained clearance for Max and flew him to Long Tieng to investigate this possibility. Nothing ever resulted from the visit.

After completing the liver fluke investigation phase, over the months Max turned his attention the relatively unknown human lung fluke infestation. I had never heard of the parasite, and because of increased activity in our area of Laos, did not find the time to visit the laboratory or closely follow the research. However, like the threat of tuberculosis, it did give me pause to consider the residual effects of kissing one's Thai girlfriend. The revelation added yet another disease to the long list of endemic health hazards with which we Westerners had to contend in Udorn town.

DET-6 ARRIVES

After assembling and conducting the final flight testing of four T-28s, on 1 April, under cover of a Thailand based SEATO

operation, the main body of Air Commandos arrived from Bien Hoa, where they had first deployed from the Eglin AFB complex on 9 March. During a buzz of activity, the unit was assigned part of Air America's hangar facilities, and quickly formed a T-28 maintenance facility and a confidential ground and flight school for Lao and Thai pilots. Known as Waterpump, or more commonly Detachment Six (Det-6), the special unit began operating TDY for six months under Commanding Officer Major Drexel B. "Barney" Cochran.⁷ Additional instructor pilots among the first group included Bill McShane, Joe Potter, and Jim Walls. McShane and Potter were known as "Red Rider" and "Little Beaver," which they used as radio call signs. Most of the detachment had served a tour in South Vietnam's Farm Gate operation with Cochran. Mike Marshall's cousin, Hal Waggoner, later joined the group.

It was several weeks before Lao pilots with T-6 experience arrived for training. This time was spent upgrading quarters and the facility, familiarization with all Thai airfields, and laying out a gunnery range ten miles southwest of Udorn at the base of the Phu Phan Mountains.

Bill McShane acted as Cochran's operations officer from a Thai snack bar under a tree. He reported twice a week to Bill Lair, who worked out of a small shack between the taxiway and runway. Because of a scarcity in qualified Lao pilots, it was later obvious that any serious air action in Laos would have to be supplemented with Thai airmen. Twelve flying sergeants were chosen. Mac noted that the Thai possessed T-28 experience, but lacked basic instrument knowledge, and required ordnance

⁷ Operational control was assigned to General Moore in Saigon, because of the similar training mission of the 1st Air Commando Squadron in South Vietnam.

practice. At first, progress with the Thai men was slow, but rapidly improved.

Always operating under a need-to-know policy, we learned very little about Air Commando business, but had our suspicions concerning "Sneaky Pete" operations. We had long been aware that increased air action was required to quell enemy advances. Even our Chief Pilot Wayne Knight had no advanced knowledge of the Air Commando program. Except for some area briefings, Wayne had little official contact with the program, or the unit's introductory stages. However, as the instructor pilots used the Club, he, like the rest of us, became acquainted with the principals. Later, he flew on a couple of local bombing flights with one of the pilots. ⁸

With the Air Boonchoo operation, a joint air tactical exercise commencing on the twentieth, the Club was swamped with more early-arriving personnel and high-ranking officers than it was ever designed to handle. Consequently, it became increasingly difficult for regular patrons to obtain a bite to eat or to find an empty seat during the evening movie. Before long, Ben Moore correctly decided to restrict Club membership. This action ruffled more feathers than he cared to admit. To us flunkeys, it was a confusing and impossible situation. One minute the Company was folding, or our unit was moving to Vientiane. The next minute, we were expanding, or the military was taking over our facilities. In addition, complicating the largely unfinished building projects, equipment and supplies

⁸ Segment sources:

Bill Leary 1964 Notes Provided the Author and those obtained from UTD.
Joe Leeker, *Air America in Laos #3-In Combat*, *Air America in Combat: Water Pump*, 9.
EW Knight Email.
Victor Anthony, 97.
Don Moody, 3.

were not delivered or were the wrong items. Air conditioners for the new bar and guest bedrooms were remanded to Bangkok customs, where they sat pending payment of one hundred percent duty.

CAESAR'S REVENGE

Before Sang was released from the hospital, a very serious incident occurred at the house. Relatives of my next-door neighbors, likely the grandmother and grandfather of the deceased baby, had moved in some time before. From time to time, I observed the old man wearing nothing but his checkered pak a maw (essentially a cloth loincloth) grubbing in the dirt behind the house for food. Seeing the dark man at his survival work, I reflected that life could never be more basic than that. Yes, these simple, uneducated country folk scrabbled to exist.

Despite a city water delivery system having been installed the previous year, their house was not plumbed for water, and an outside source was required for drinking and cooking rice. Therefore, following ancient tradition, the old lady, carrying a wooden yoke on her shoulders and two buckets, conducted two daily trips down the street to obtain fresh water from the neighborhood well at Wat Po. Like tribal people in Laos, Thai-Lao countrywomen also traditionally performed this heavy work. Surprisingly, with the full buckets oscillating at the end of a flexible wooden yoke, she never lost a drop. I did not know yoke woman's age, but she looked very old, and I had to respect and marvel at her skill and stamina.

As was our custom when I was home, Caesar preceded me out the gate for a run after breakfast. This particular day our timing was bad, for at that exact moment, the old lady shuffled by to acquire half the family's daily water ration. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, the large dog leaped and loosely caught her arm in his mouth. Unfortunately, reacting like most people

in a similar situation, the woman jerked her arm up. The movement resulted in several deep puncture wounds. Both the human and the dog could not believe what had happened. There was no follow-up attack on his part. As she looked stunned at her arm, then at the dog, Caesar merely sat next to her with his tongue lolling from his mouth. As I stood transfixed and puzzled by the incident, he gazed up at her as if to say, "what just happened."

I rushed out wondering what might have perpetrated the unprovoked attack. I was perplexed: he had never bitten humans or animals before, preferring to only bark or slap adversaries with his enormous paws. However, there had been past problems with the locals. One day in front of the house, Caesar had barked at and terrified a young child. Luckily, the man who worked across the street at the Air Force fuel farm was home, and he helped interpret and mediate the situation. Since the dog had obviously "scared the soul" out of the boy, the mother demanded ten baht to expiate the incident and have a string tied around the child's wrist by a monk at the local wat. Normally I was against extortion, or bribes, or what the Orientals call squeeze. However, I was well aware that such procedures were common practice and tended to supplement low wages. Therefore, to forestall trouble, or attacks on the dog, I made an exception and paid the outrageous sum.

Another factor might have influenced the incident. Ever since the dog entered my life, the womenfolk next door had enjoyed teasing him by shouting his name. Caesar was normally high strung, and their behavior only increased his unease and barking. Certain that their actions would eventually present negative repercussions, I cautioned them repeatedly against further taunting. However, they enjoyed seeing him agitated, and continued the practice. Whether this was a primary reason for

the incident, or the woman had encroached on his perceived territory, was academic, for the damage had been done.

While I examined the old lady's deep, nasty-looking puncture wounds, I thought she was indeed lucky, for if the dog had been serious about causing damage and clamped down tightly, she might have lost her entire arm.

Then her distressed husband rushed to the scene, and after assessing the situation, there were a few anxious moments before he intervened. Obviously from the old school, the dark, heavily-tattooed man gently cradled her swelling arm and began blowing on the injury.⁹ At the same time, he uttered magical incantations, calculated to cure the hurt and chase away evil spirits. Except perhaps related to American Indian lore observed in Hollywood movies, I had never observed anything like that before. Through the Thai Air Force relative, the husband indicated that fifty baht would prevent my dog from dying. The implied threat made me extremely angry and confused, so, before thinking clearly, I replied bluntly that if Caesar died, he would die. I wanted to take bucket woman to the hospital for a tetanus injection, but northeast ignorance and suspicion prevailed and my offer was rejected. Therefore, highly embarrassed, I forgot my ethics and paid the stipulated sum. Then, again reminding the husband of his mortality should my dog mysteriously expire, we repaired to our respective houses.

Once inside, reflecting on the episode, I was not comfortable with the situation. Caesar was inoculated for rabies, so I was not overly concerned about his health. However, I did wonder if he could contract a disease from her. Aside from the folk medicine blowing practice (a psychological crutch tailored for the superstitious), from my Boy Scout first aid

⁹ Common to the northeast, marking religious connotations, the blue Pali inscriptions supposedly warded off evil spirits.

training, I knew that puncture wounds were the worst kind of injury. If neglected in the tropics, they quickly became infected. Therefore, her arm required immediate cleaning and the gashes medicated.

I had never been in their rude wooden house before, but this was an extreme situation, and I felt an overwhelming obligation to do everything in my power to assist them. Therefore, I barged into their small house with a pan of water, soap, and antiseptic to administer first aid. After indicating that my familiar tools constituted my magic, I was allowed to minister to her needs. I knew her arm was dirty, but amazingly, it required three washings to scrub the filth off her arm and reach skin level. I wondered what she did with all the water hauled to the house, and how anyone could live without bathing. As I tended to my work, I knew she hurt, but throughout the procedure, the stoic woman was silent. After doing all I could, knowing she needed more help than I could offer, I once again recommended that she go with me to the hospital for professional care. She refused.

Later in the day, worried about my potential liability should the arm become badly infected or she died of tetanus, I went to the airfield for advice on the matter. I returned in a B-Bus with a Thai clerk to interpret and gain a release declaration absolving me of any further responsibility or blame if she would not accompany me to the hospital for medical treatment. When we arrived, the lady's arm had swollen to twice its normal size and she grimaced in pain. I suppose by then she realized that she needed additional help, for she agreed to accompany me to the dreaded regional hospital where a nurse made a snide remark and washed the rest of the dirt from her arm. Then she painted it liberally with antiseptic, and administered tetanus and antibiotic injections. Now it was up to the old

lady's immune system as to how fast she healed. Knowing that the basics had been performed, on the way home, I felt relieved, and I believed that she finally realized the importance of properly tending to the wounds. We parted friends, their family was fifty baht richer, and I was a little wiser regarding my dog's behavior, and the interpersonal relationships with the town folk.

I thought grandma would be laid up for several days, but the next morning, from my front porch vantage point, I observed her hustling down the road with her yoke and buckets. When I hailed her, I noticed the swelling had remarkably subsided overnight and she appeared quite well. There were no further recriminations from the incident, but to prevent future problems, I decided to buy Caesar a muzzle.

On the ninth, I flew a thirty minute proficiency check ride with Captain Scratch Kanach and Stan Wilson. After all the management personnel changes, Scratch had assumed this duty to supplement Wayne's role. Like the first class physical examination, this check ride was required every six months. Scratch was a perfect person for the job. In fact, he was so laid back one hardly knew he was in the cockpit. By now, we all knew exactly how each other flew, so these rides were academic. Maneuvers included basics, such as normal and steep approaches, followed by hydraulics off and autorotation emergency procedures.

Since we still serviced the Bangkok JUSMAAG contract, I was tapped for a ten day assignment in Bangkok. Accompanied by Flight Mechanic Lacsina, I flew Hotel-15 to the big city. After a period of choosing our own lodging, the Company had again begun dictating where we would overnight. This time it was the Atlanta Hotel, located on a side road off Sukhumvit Road. A very large German man named Max Henn, reputed to have been a Nazi during World War Two, owned the Atlanta. In addition to the unpretentious hotel, Henn owned a yacht, and invited his guests to cruise the Chao Phraya every Sunday.

Regardless of the year, every April in Southeast Asia was hot and uncomfortable. I do not know if this had any bearing on my health, but I had not been feeling particularly well, experiencing fatigue and a dull, uncomfortable pressure in the upper left side of my chest. I was too young for heart problems, so Doctor Kao offered a speculative medical explanation: an inter-plural virus.

After checking into the hotel, I sat on the bed contemplating a short nap when I glanced at the wall. Spread out next to a picture was the largest, nastiest, and hairiest spider I had ever seen. I called for the houseboy who, without any qualms, dispatched the beast.

JUSMAAG personnel rarely worked on the weekend, so I had plenty of time to rest before the scheduled flight on Monday morning. Because of my condition, I took it easy and did not even join the Henn cruise. However, I did meet a pleasant Australian couple by the pool enjoying a few beers. Without imbibing, I passed several enjoyable hours with them and reaffirmed that Aussie people were the best of the best. Always an upbeat people, delightful is the superlative term that comes

to mind. The first time I ever met Aussies was in Kowloon at the Waltzing Matilda bar, and again at Cubi Point Naval Air Base in the Philippines. I found the men highly entertaining. They loved to drink, sing, and fight in that order. The men at Cubi Point were assigned to a His Majesty's Service (HMS) carrier anchored in the bay. The pilots flew jets designated Sea Venoms, and performed precision maneuvers over the area. The most exciting event was the engine start, which involved the equivalent of a shotgun shell in lieu of an auxiliary power unit (APU) to rotate the compressor wheel. To the delight of everyone watching on the flight line, when detonated, a huge cloud of black smoke erupted from the tailpipe. Of course, there was a little apprehension the first time we witnessed the unfamiliar procedure.

Monday morning, a pudgy JUSMAAG major wanted to fly into the northeast region for an all day mission. I had flown with him once before, but he did not offer any explanation as to why or where we were going, and I did not ask for particulars. Marking the first time since entering Thailand during HMM-261's Third MEU incursion, I stopped at Korat RTAF base for fuel. (Korat was also known as Nakhon Ratchasima and was recorded as Sierra-13) Surrounded by mountains to the south and southwest, just becoming a military logistical center for Thailand and Laos, the area still looked largely uncluttered and much the same as I recalled. As a crossroads into the northeast, Korat was notable for its silk trade and ancient Khmer ruins at Pimai that dated from the 11th century. The un-restored ruins closely resembled the archeological style of Angkor Wat in Cambodia, but on a much smaller scale.

I thought refueling would be an easy process, but was shocked when the Army lieutenant in charge of the POL began

calculating charges and surcharges for a gallon of gas. ¹ It amounted to hundreds of dollars. When he quoted me a price, I laughed, for I had no credit card or money to pay for fuel; that was always a Customer's responsibility. When the major returned from whatever he was doing, he was as perplexed as I was. No amount of talking would alter the lieutenant's mind. Phone calls to Bangkok and Udorn did not result in any fuel, so we retraced our itinerary to Lopburi (known as Sierra-15). At the site, I noticed more activity, more tents, and more structures since the previous year.

The following day I was assigned to the Jansky and Bailey (J&B) radio research site, where new equipment and radio wave propagation was being tested in a harsh jungle environment. During the crew change, pickup of personnel and groceries took place on secluded railroad tracks behind tall structures enclosing the government tobacco monopoly. In a cozy deal, the man on the street was little aware that top government leaders shared in the profits of the organization. Since opening the remote semi-classified J&B site, other pilots, including Mike Marshall and Wayne Knight, had worked the site. They correctly indicated that the confined area was surrounded by high trees, and regardless of wind direction, the approach and departure corridors remained the same. I would conduct shuttles into the site again on the 17th.

Wayne was in Bangkok on scheduled time off. During a prearranged trip, we visited the city's successful Besser concrete block factory. When we introduced ourselves to the Thai foreman and informed him that we were purchasing a machine and were in the process of building a similar plant in Kuala Lumpur, he graciously showed us all facets of the operation. During the

¹ POL: Petroleum, oil, and lubricants.

tour he specified potential problems with the machine and business. The visit was impressive and very interesting, and tended to further whet my appetite to invest in such a project. However, my gut feeling for Coble, who was between Kuala Lumpur and Udorn, was still mostly negative, and I had reservations about his ability to manage such a company. I continued to weigh the pros and cons and wait before committing any funds.

Weekday standbys at the airfield were no longer situated in the substandard, seedy terminal. Instead, this was allowed in more pleasant surroundings at a hotel-golf course area located on a wide grass median between the commercial and military complexes. As attractive stewards and crew from JAL and other airlines rested there between flights, it was a lot more enjoyable. However, there was not much opportunity to play, as one had to wear a uniform and be ready to launch on a moment's notice. To pass the time, I attempted to study an accounting book that "Wild" Bill Donovan, a Vientiane fixed wing driver, had lent me. I regretted not taking a few business courses while at Duke and thought I might use the time to catch up. But with the standby necessarily being a boring pastime and the distractions, I managed to learn very little.

On Sunday I flew military VIPs to Supinburi northwest of Bangkok to conduct JUSMAAG sponsored people-to-people parachute jumps. Thai and U.S. Special Forces participated. One of my passengers was General Rubin Tucker, Deputy Chief of JUSMAAG and the last White Star soldier to depart Laos in October 1962. He was not a particularly large man, but still impressive. Tucker, a "salty" and fearless warrior, acted as the wind dummy for the other jumpers, dropping out the cargo door on the first pass. Another person who jumped that day was General Richard Stilwell, the tall son of "Vinegar Joe" of World War Two Burma fame. General Dick was going to replace Major General Earnest F.

Easterbrook, Commanding Officer of MACTHAI. In the summer of 1963, Easterbrook was resentful of U.S. Embassy intervention in anything military, to the point of haggling over post exchange (PX) privileges for embassy employees (and probably contractors like Air America). At the time, in contrast to the Air Force, the U.S. Army had difficulty getting things done. One problem was that the general failed to fully understand that the State Department controlled affairs in Thailand and Laos, and the ambassador made the final decision. Therefore, Stilwell was taking over to rectify the situation and establish a division headquarters at Korat. It was a good choice, as Stilwell established greater rapport with Ambassador Martin.²

General Easterbrook did not jump that day, but merely observed. The ones who participated were not young men, and I had a lot of respect for them, although I believed that anybody who jumped out of a perfectly good aircraft was a bit balmy.

On the 22nd, I deadheaded from a hot and dusty Bangkok to a hot and dusty Udorn on 51G, a C-45 twin engine plane similar to the type I had transitioned to and learned to fly radio instruments while in the U.S. Navy training command.

While in Bangkok, I purchased a leather muzzle for Caesar, for I was a little concerned that there might be a repeat performance of the old lady incident. Overall, the dog was not antisocial, but he showed disdain for some people. He basically was a coward. However, around the house, particularly when I was there, he was very territorial and protective. He put on a show for me, causing me to worry about what would happen when I was not home. The dog hated the muzzle. It was too restrictive, not allowing him to grab various sticks, stones, and anything else he loved to carry in his mouth. After a

² McCoskrie.

frenzied few minutes, I removed the device and decided to break him into wearing it when I had more time. I was never successful.

During April, yet another coup unfolded in Vientiane. The action produced negative results for the Royal Lao Government and the country of Laos. Souvanna Phouma, while on his way back to Vientiane from trips to China and North Vietnam, armed with assurances to help resolve the problematic Lao situation, was briefed in Hong Kong on the latest positive political developments. Chiefly, if General Phoumi concurred, there was some hope of resurrecting protocols of the 27 November 1962 agreement. They included unified formation of a mixed police force for the administrative capital and a 30,000-man army consisting of 10,000 men from each faction. ¹

It had been a long time since principal government leaders of the three factions had met to discuss the political discord plaguing the country. Therefore, on Friday 17 April, Souvanna Phouma, Phoumi Nosavan, and Souphanouvong met at Khang Khay in an effort to discuss a mechanism to allow the return of Pathet Lao representatives and re-form the fractured coalition government. The Prime Minister once again proposed the Luang Prabang Royal Capital as a neutral and demilitarized zone to accommodate his coalition government. However, this and other proposals were rejected by right wing army General Nosavan, and during the two-day talks, nothing concrete was resolved relating to the coalition. Souvanna, extremely disappointed by the inability to accomplish anything tangible, departed the Plain of Jars site and issued statements to Western diplomats and the

¹ Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS): #20, 04/09/64, Telegram from the Consulate General in Hong Kong to the Department of State.

press about resigning his Prime Minister's position on the 20th. His credibility regarding the statement was questioned by many diplomats, for when frustrated over past stalemates, Souvanna had issued similar statements and still remained Prime Minister. However, this time, as soon as the talks terminated, skirmishing between combatants occurred on the Plain.

Not long after Souvanna returned to the administrative capital, an untimely right wing coup unfolded that shook the country's political structure badly and further agitated the military scene in the country.

Seeds of a coup had festered for years over Souvanna Phouma's perceived value as a strong national leader. Right from the start of an Accords-sponsored coalition government in June 1962, rightist opposition and rumors of a coup had proliferated.

One disquieting event had led to another, and they were many. When China increased its Military Region One road building activities in late 1962, fears for the nation's integrity increased. Before his premature death, leftist Quinim Pholsena's burgeoning influence in the government worried conservatives. Since February's losses to Pathet Lao forces, anxiety had been rising among many top ranking FAR officers as to Souvanna's actual commitment to contain Pathet Lao gains and any future conflict. The Prime Minister's latest efforts to neutralize Luang Prabang without Pathet Lao concessions added to considerable rightist unrest. In addition, there was a pervading sense of distrust regarding FAN intentions in Vientiane. The FAR General Staff was also at odds with the Prime Minister over his failure to create a functioning government, and his approach toward a downsizing of the FAR army. Indeed, in October 1962 the Lao National Assembly, led by President Phoui Sananikone, granted Souvanna Phouma's coalition government one-year special powers to establish its mission. These powers were renewed in

October 1963, but there was dissention over the fact that the coalition had made no progress toward achieving its objectives.²

With a somewhat reluctant wink from Military Region Five's powerful Commanding Officer, General Kouprasith Abhay, and taking advantage of recent political uncertainty, DNC Police General Siho Lanphouthacoul, deemed a politically unsophisticated hack, ordered his men to establish roadblocks throughout town, and to seize Wattay Airport, the radio station, and the national bank. Encountering little resistance, there was no blood shed and the combined forces easily captured the city in the name of the National Army Revolutionary Committee, a cabal of seventy-five conservative officers, who insisted that the coup was necessary to effect national reconciliation and achieve peace and harmony. (Kouprasith was the committee head and Siho was his deputy.) However, actual motivation for the coup involved elimination of the Neutralist army and to stimulate Souvanna's accommodation to right wing conservative doctrines.

During the coordinated roundup, Souvanna Phouma, his Interior Minister, General Amkha Soukhavong, and fifteen prominent FAR, neutralist and French officials were placed under house arrest. Troops surrounded General Phoumi's house. Disliked, or envied by peers for his inept and corrupt oversight of the Finance Ministry, other greedy schemes, and especially a perceived moderation toward Souvanna and the concept of a Neutralist government, the general, who was also Deputy Premier and Defense Minister, claimed no interest in a coup and was effectively neutralized. Additionally, there was some concern that should Phouma resign his position, Phoumi would assume the

² FRUS: #34, 04/22/64, Memorandum of Conversation.
Memorandum Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern
Affairs, Marshall Green to Dean Rusk, 09/28/64.

post of Prime Minister. By morning, with a curfew and martial law in place, the situation appeared calm. ³

Before the coup began, Leonard Unger had attended an all-hands Southeast Asia ambassador meeting in Saigon, conducted by Dean Rusk. There he stated that his intelligence sources had indicated that Kouprasith intended to convene the National Assembly and propose that it adopt resolutions to abrogate the Geneva Accords and form a right wing government led by Prince Boun Oum and Phoumi Nosavan.

When news of the Lao coup arrived in U.S. diplomatic circles, Washington high level planners and others around the world shifted into high gear seeking various solutions to the problem. They worked under Unger's premise, that the Government of National Union should be reconstituted. Participants at the National Security Council (NSC) meeting sought to maintain the May 1961 cease fire agreement, and wanted no U.S. association with the coup, so as not to encourage the Pathet Lao, et. al. to begin military movements. Parties once again recommended dispatching the Seventh Fleet and beefing up the Thai army with a U.S. unit to discourage North Vietnam from taking advantage of the unsettled Lao situation. Secretary Rusk proposed stationing fleet units at Danang (also known as Tourane) or Cam Ranh Bay to demonstrate U.S. support. Instead, the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended periodic fleet sorties into South Vietnamese waters. A Seventh Fleet task force, built around the carrier USS *Kitty Hawk*, sallied forth into the South China Sea. ⁴

³ CIA Memorandum, 04/22/64.
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 107.
Foreign Relations, State, 04/19/64.
Situation Report, 04/19/64, 1/1.

⁴ With the flap receding, the U.S. Naval Fleet was recalled to normal operations by 23 April.
Ed Marolda and Fitzgerald, 375.
Dean Rusk-State, 04/20/64.

Armed with USG statements condemning the coup, Ambassador Unger returned to Vientiane on the 19th. After instructing the U.S. Mission to cease fuel imports, he immediately met with Kouprasith and Siho and discouraged further coup-inspired movements. He took pains to enlighten them that continued U.S. support for the Government of National Union (GNU) under Souvanna Phouma and the Geneva Accords was the only hope for a moderate and stable government. He also counseled the leaders to immediately release all detainees. Then, without specifications, he hinted that unless attempts to form a right wing government were abandoned, there would be other more serious sanctions against the coup forces. The package included gradually withdrawing dependents from the city, issuing a public announcement suspending U.S. military shipments to rightists, withdrawal of Western Ambassadors, and removal of American aircraft. As a first step, unless the Revolutionary Committee reinstated the GNU on the 20th, he would instruct American advisors working with the Lao government to remain home.

Reading between the lines, architects of the coup were surprised and alarmed by Unger's ominous language, and requested his advice on how to proceed. Of course, he reiterated the necessity to restore the Government of National Union. Within days, other western nations, the Soviets, King Savang Vatthana, and even General Phoumi, disgusted with Siho, heartily denounced the coup and wanted the status quo restored.

Over the following two days, negotiations for a reconstituted government took place. In a country where the "Bo Pen Yong" attitude reigned supreme, no one envisioned how long this process would continue. After his release from house

arrest, Phoumi, along with Siho and Kouprasith, attempted to persuade Souvanna to resign so they could form a new government without Pathet Lao representation. For his part, Unger attempted to convince the generals that Pathet Lao representatives would never accept such conditions and it would result in total destruction of the Geneva Accords.

While visiting King Vatthana, Unger discovered that the monarch refused to accept either Souvanna's or his cabinet's resignations. Bolstered by USG and the King's support for him under the Geneva framework, the Prime Minister indicated a willingness to continue in the office of the coalition government. With this major hurdle resolved, danger still existed from the Revolutionary Committee, whose reactionaries might reject any compromises. ⁵

Directly following the coup, members of the Revolutionary Committee received congratulations from Kong Le, and an indication of his troops' willingness to join the coup. In contrast to this report, International Control Commission members located on the Plain of Jars stated that Kong Le remained faithful to the policy of neutrality. Noting that Kong Le journeyed from his Moung Phanh headquarters to visit officers at a PDJ training camp, a CIA memorandum reported speculation that he may have received advanced warning of the coup.

⁵ NSC meeting, 04/19/64.
Telegram State to Dean Rusk, 04/19/64.
Telegram State to Leonard Unger, 04/19/64.
Conference Unger and Rusk by Teletype, 04/19/64.
Bundy to President Johnson, 04/21/64.
Memerandum Mike Forrestal to NSC to LBJ, 31.
Telegram State to Embassy Laos, 04/22/64.
NSC meeting, 1645, 04/22/64.

Confusing the issue even more, the report stated that Kong Le had the potential of replacing Souvanna as Prime Minister. ⁶

In the south, General Thao Ma was convinced that his boss, General Phoumi, was secretly directing the coup, and supported the National Revolutionary Committee. However, as the situation became more confused in Vientiane, and particularly among southern regional leaders, within a few days he withdrew his support for the NRC. When the generals met at Savannakhet, they agreed to comply with coup leaders' ground rules.

Although the last T-28 strike mission occurred on the 18th, the coup did not prevent selected eastern reconnaissance missions from Savannakhet to determine if the enemy might attempt to take advantage of the situation in Vientiane and attack FAR positions. ⁷

Other Phoumi loyalists, Generals Vang Pao, Kham Khong, and Sang met at Paksane after closely observing the situation over a two-week period. The leaders agreed not to conduct any military moves, but to only take action against the Revolutionary Committee should the situation so warrant.

Continuing with an assessment of enemy reaction to the coup, the Agency believed that Pathet Lao forces were incapable of significant movement without Vietnamese support, and that it was conceivable the communists would refrain from offensive action until observing right wing and USG reactions to the coup.

Restating the long recognized military facts of life, if so motivated, the Pathet Lao and their mentors always possessed the capability to eject the Meo from positions south of Route-7 and force Kong Le's men from Moungh Phanh into the surrounding hills, although the enemy offensive would then stall in the rough

⁶ FRUS: #28, 04/20/64, Dean Rusk to State.

⁷ Telegram State: Periodic Situation, 05/06/64.

mountainous terrain between Route-7, the Plain of Jars, and the capital.

In Military Region Three, where conflicted politics existed between fractional northern and southern parties, CIA analysts projected that the Pathet Lao could capture Thakhet within a relatively short time, but such action would precipitate a U.S. (and quite possibly a Thai) military response. Therefore, the intelligence experts estimated that it was doubtful that such action would occur at this time.

Further south in Military Region Four, Pathet Lao forces could easily move on Saravane, but would probably wait until the situation became less obscured. Official opinion centered more on the Pathet Lao's increasing use of eastern trails during the confused Vientiane situation. ⁸

From the beginning, the coup was essentially localized. For example, in the remote northern region of Military Region One, at Ban Nam Thouei (Site-118), International Voluntary Service (IVS) worker Joe Flipse talked to Yao (Iu Mien) Chieftain, Chao Mai Srisongfa, concerning the coup's lasting effects. He noted a total lack of concern. Houa Kong province was staffed and administered by Luang Prabang officials with little acrimony between parties. Even if Vientiane politics altered appreciably, it would not have affected the Ban Houei Sai region. Commercially divorced from the rest of the country, the local economy largely relied on government payrolls and Thai tourists crossing the Mekong to take advantage of duty free shopping and to purchase luxury goods. ⁹

⁸ CIA Information Intelligence Cable, 04/20/64.

⁹ Joe Flipse Email, 06/16/97.

As of 20 April, there were no firm reports of unusual enemy activity. However, a communist build-up steadily continued east of Xieng Khouang Ville, with the objective of threatening the strategic Tha Thom corridor (the Route-4 artery) leading to Paksane. Before the coup, Pathet Lao forces, supported by North Vietnamese troops moved into the Plain of Jars sector and the Ban Ban Valley to threaten the Neutralists and continue pressure on Meo and RLA units located in the Phou Nong hills south of Route-7. However, these moves were considered nothing more than a continuation of the March build-up. Still, like any assessment in hostile situations, this one proved merely a calculated guess, and was shortly exposed to be seriously flawed. ¹⁰

By the 21st, Wattay Airport, closed since the 19th, was once again opened to international traffic. Bird and Son and Air America daily operations resumed at the airport, but with some changes. As a precaution against unforeseen military flare-ups, a majority of planes and crews RON nightly at the Udorn airport. Previously, only six Air America planes and crews had RON at Udorn. ¹¹ With the parking ramp saturated with planes and helicopters packed side-by-side, some planes were re-positioned to Savannakhet. Leased Royal Lao Government and military assistance program (MAP) aircraft remained in Vientiane.

Adding to the already existing confusion and overburdened Club facility conditions, mainly precipitated by the recent introduction of the Air Commando unit and SEATO forces, up to thirty-seven Air America employees billeted on cots in the new schoolhouse and the former Club lounge, which was humorously

¹⁰ CIA Information Intelligence Cable, 04/20/64.

¹¹ Author Note: In effect, the coup allowed Souvanna Phouma to temporarily realize his goal to remove Air America from Vientiane. However, I am reasonably sure he never envisioned all the conditions involved.

called the west dormitory. I did not feel too sorry for the crews, for now the previously coddled fixed wingers were now experiencing a taste of roughing it on the job, but certainly not to the extent that we did in the mountains.

In order to be available for all eventualities during the period, COO Jim Coble remained overnight in his office at the Air America compound during the trouble. For days, Jim's duties substantially increased, and he compared the hubbub around the operations office tantamount to that of a madhouse. In addition to scheduling UH-34D aircraft and crews, each arriving group of fixed wing crewmembers had to be assigned sleeping areas and supplied following day work schedules. He had to ensure that all aircraft were safely on the ground, produce flight and pick-up schedules, distribute schedules, and file aircraft status reports. Because of the confusing and unfolding situation, these necessary items were delayed with respect to normal time frames. Therefore, it was usually midnight before he completed all tasks. Since crew pickups began at 0530 hours, he elected to remain at the field rather than go home and lose even more sleep. To maintain some semblance of civilization, Bonnie brought him clean clothes every morning and frequently delivered food in the evening.

Overall, it was a frantic period, although all the pilots were patient, understanding, and cooperative. Actually, when disparate groups merged, the scene took on an "old home week" atmosphere, with pilots relating sea stories and joshing each other. Although the process continued for several additional days on a smaller scale, the arrangement was not permanent at a facility that was never designed to accommodate so many extra ships and personnel.

COBLE GOES BALLISTIC

During the period, a rare and uncharacteristic incident occurred outside Coble's office that might have been caused by the stressful times. After work, Joe Marlin passed the CPH office. No one recalls the exact nature of the problem or what triggered the fracas, but likely unkind words were exchanged between Jim and Joe, which resulted in a spontaneous fist fight. It did not last long. Coble, renown for having an extremely short fuse, reportedly threw the first blow. After several punches were exchanged, Jim knocked Joe to the ground and kicked him viciously in the ribs. Word of the incident traveled fast through our group, and many people did not condone the blatant aggression. To a man they were shocked and surprised, for Marlin, a normally mild mannered good natured individual, and respected Flight Mechanic, was enormously popular among both peers and pilots. Curiously, even Coble admitted afterward that Joe was one of his favorite Flight Mechanics.

As one of the many no-nos in the Company Personnel Manual, fighting was grounds for termination with cause. Base Manager Ben Moore asked Coble what happened, for such an incident was akin to a senior officer striking an enlisted man in the military service, and all hell would have transpired. However, since Coble was soon leaving Air America to manage the Kuala Lumpur business, nothing more was said and the incident faded into obscurity.

Coble resigned his COO position in May. After declaring the intention to retire, he was summoned to headquarters Taipei, where he spent two days obtaining pay for accrued leave, and processing out of the organization. During this period, a debriefing was conducted in a windowless room walled with acoustic tile, and his obligations for silence were specified under the Official Secrets Act. He is convinced that the

dialogue was taped. As there was no pressure to leave Thailand, he worked until the third week in May. He arrived in Kuala Lumpur by train on 4 June.

Responding to a VPFO message, on 16 May, Ben Moore replied to Talmage Boyd:

"C.J. Abadie will fill vacancy formed by resignation of J.A. Coble. Pleased with prospect of Captain Abadie here. Hope this assignment is equally acceptable to him. After Ab's arrival at Udorn and having the opportunity of discussing the situation, I may have further comments." ¹²

LAOS

Within four days of the Vientiane coup, despite potential harm and no assurance that Souvanna's government or the Geneva Accords would survive, the more obvious dangers inherent in the fracas waned. The Revolutionary Committee and FAR generals settled for reorganization of the government, rather than its overthrow. Furthermore, the generals agreed that Souvanna could continue to lead a coalition government in exchange for several political and military changes, including installing Phoumi as Deputy Prime Minister. Over time, a reshuffling of ministers resulted in a stronger pro-western government by adding 80 conservative junior officers associated with the coup. This restructuring resulted in right wing representatives greatly outnumbering the Neutralists in the new coalition that effectively merged the center and the right under Souvanna.

In addition to the increase in conservative delegates, Souvanna replaced some absent Pathet Lao ministers (NLHS) with

¹² CJ Abadie did not actually return to Udorn until much later. Jim Coble Emails, 04/27/02 (2), 04/29/02, 05/09/02, 08/28/07 (3). EW Knight Emails, 07/16/07, 08/30/07. Ben Moore Message to the VPFO, 05/16/64.

Neutralists, some of whom established a cabinet at Vang Vieng.¹³ The coup and its political ramifications caused a loud and hostile uproar from Pathet Lao ministers who had withdrawn from the government the previous year to install their own regime on the Plain of Jars. Protesting that the merger and new ministers were not legal, Souvanna Phouma replied to his absent ministers that he could not allow government operations to lapse because the communist representatives would not return to the capital and assume their duties.

The longer-term result of the coup created a marginal success for the right wing faction. While the coup failed to eliminate the GNU, it did succeed in diminishing Phoumi's power and influence, and increased an influential role for the Sananikone family. Souvanna was obligated to increase non-Phoumist representation in his cabinet, and the Pathet Lao were virtually excluded from the government. Additionally, attempts to integrate the Neutralist and rightist forces resulted in a few Neutralist troops defecting to the enemy.

Destabilizing effects of the coup presented the Eastern camp with a priceless opportunity in Laos. Before the coup, Pathet Lao leaders discussed internal problems with Souvanna Phouma. With the advent of the political upheaval, they were aware that the Prime Minister and right wing would never negotiate in good faith unless defeated in battle. Enhanced by the inability to convince General Phoumi to neutralize Luang Prabang and Vientiane, fighting seemed the only solution to the present problem.

Therefore, Chinese, Pathet Lao, and North Vietnamese representatives decided to seize Laos and relieve pressure on any U.S. designs to aid their allies in South Vietnam. Several

¹³ NLHS-Neo Lao Hat Sat: This was the communist political wing; the Pathet Lao was the military wing of the party.

reasons contributed to their decision. The coup polarized the Lao government. The Pathet Lao could claim that the right wing faction had violated the Geneva Accords, and could then act without claims of breaking the Accords. Fearing Chinese intervention, the U.S. would not commit to a major conflict to save Laos.

Intelligence estimates stated that the Pathet Lao objective was to take all Laos and hold territory already under their control. If this goal was not achieved before the rains began, then they would complete the job in 1965. ¹⁴

¹⁴ John Pratt, *CHECO*, 12-13.
Norman Hannah, 119-120.
CIA Information Cable, 05/18/64,
Green to Secretary Rusk, 09/28/64.

The day after I returned from Bangkok, Operations scheduled me to RON at Sam Tong. Thus far, the general's coup had not affected our Military Region Two helicopter operations. However, there were several rumors and considerable confusion about what was actually occurring in Vientiane and in the mountains. There was also significant concern about Kong Le's loyalty to the Western cause, and the direction he and his men would ultimately pursue on the Plain of Jars. Since Riley and crew had been treacherously downed by a Neutralist splinter faction in the fall of 1962, I had, with U.S. Embassy sponsorship, reluctantly worked with certain Neutralist units loading the 85mm gun on the Plain of Jars and working the area around Phu Khe before it fell to the enemy. Caution was always paramount in the cockpit and cargo compartment during these times, for we disliked and distrusted turncoats. Few of us working upcountry actually envisioned Kong Le's forces contributing anything substantial to the war effort. Additionally, Tony continually railed about State Department ineptness concerning the overall cause, and the tiny, "commie-pinko-bastard" self-proclaimed general who could never be relied on by Vang Pao's men. His formidable bias was logical, for our lives depended on mutual trust between the friendly parties we supported.

Captain Howard Estes and I deadheaded to Wattay Airport on C-45, 73 Zulu. The wait for a ride to Sam Tong enabled us to visit the Flight Information Center for the latest local and upcountry information.

According to Bill Solin, the fledgling organization had made encouraging progress by March. Air Operations Customer Earl Jones had replaced the hostile and uncooperative Frank Daly in

Vientiane. Jones liked the concept of a central FIC. After a brief familiarization period, he agreed that FIC should be the sole Air America source for all flight information. Consequently, he terminated the Daly-inspired individual pilot briefings and debriefings, and he began to funnel information he believed necessary to divulge for aircrew flight safety to operations specialists Mullen and Solin. The two men responded positively to this effort, diligently accumulated the information, and placed it into easily disseminated map form for flight crews to view. As a result, pilots were impressed by the difference in the quality and intelligence of the comprehensive briefings, and began to cooperate more fully with FIC.

Since a few Customers, for whatever reason, continued to withhold information regarding hostile areas, the briefing system was far from perfect, and American aircraft continued to be fired on and hit in areas depicted on FIC charts as friendly. These errors fostered some consternation between Solin and Mullin, who considered that they had erroneously briefed crews. As a result, they sought additional intelligence information. At best, it was a difficult task, for any intelligence unit is only as good as the current and relevant information it receives. In addition, the more intel feeding into a system, the more the requirement to establish reliability and validity of the information. All recent information relating to a subject tended to increase or confirm data already accumulated. Unless one was properly focused on the primary type and goal, the information might easily be considered worthless. ¹

Fortified with the latest sketchy intelligence indicating that the Vientiane political situation continued in flux, and that upcountry information would be supplemented by the Customer

¹ Tom Walker, FIC.

where we worked, we caught a ride with Captain Bob LaTurner on Caribou, 851. I liked the Caribou, as it possessed excellent short takeoff or landing (STOL) characteristics that incorporated a reverse engine thrust for additional braking action on short dirt or grass strips. Significantly, older PICs who flew these DCH planes were extremely talented and experienced pilots.

We arrived at Sam Tong late. While Howard waited to fly a required route check with the CPH, who was otherwise engaged with Elmer Munsell, I managed to eke out a couple of hours in Hotel Foxtrot with Flight Mechanic Carl Gable. That night Wayne, who had been flying Hotel-12 with Elmer since the 20th, filled us in on what little he knew about the developing situation. Everyone expected hostilities to break out again soon, but there was still little reported conflict in and around the Plain of Jars. Some of Kong Le's men, unhappy over the FAR hostage taking in Vientiane, and their commander's growing relationship with the RLA, had transferred allegiance to the Dueanist splinter movement. If that trend continued unabated, the FAN would have few men remaining to hold their shaky positions.

A few recently hired Filipino Flight Mechanics began appearing in Udorn. One flying with Wayne was Romeo "Chris" Crisologo, a man with the well-developed physique of a wrestler or weight lifter. I had not flown with Chris yet, but in addition to aviation, I discovered that we had something else in common, for he hailed from the northwestern portion of Mindoro, Philippines, the large island immediately south of Luzon, where I had spent an active month flying during Operation Tulungan. In talking with him about his homeland, I discovered that he had heard stories regarding the aloof tribal humans cursed with small vestigial caudal protrusions who lived in the remote central mountains. However, living on the northwest portion of

the island, he had never actually seen the elusive phantoms. Interestingly, prior to our discussion, I had received light-hearted ribbing from peers regarding my tails tale; now at last, I finally had someone to somewhat corroborate my story.

Each night, after transmitting flight time to the Vientiane radio operator over the high frequency net for relay to Udorn operations, the Vientiane Oscar Mike (Operations Manager) informed us of the next morning's work assignment. At this time, contractual acronyms used were either USAID or 713 (CIA). Within a short time, RO would be added to this short list. This stood for Requirement Office, a military logistics division imbedded in USOM. RO was staffed with U.S. Army personnel who specifically dealt with the needs of the Neutralist army, mostly centered around Moung Soui (VS-108). The site was a sizable fallback area along Route-7 on the Plain of Jars southwestern fringes. I had previously landed at Moung Soui with Rashan, Vang Pao's point liaison man. Apparently, Vang Pao did not trust the Neuts either. Rather than unduly expose himself to danger, he used his favored Thai PARU to coordinate military activities with RO, Thai, and Neutralist leaders.

Wearing unmarked greens and his .38 caliber pistol, the compact, well-built Rashan was impressive, and, according to rumor, a person not to fool with. This was important when landing at a site of doubtful nature. The dark, handsome man was a very affable person. In addition to other talents, he spoke excellent English and exhibited an unusual sense of humor. Over time, we found that he possessed a quirk commonplace in Thai culture, but very confusing to Americans. While walking together, if he liked you, he grasped and held your hand. The act had no sexual connotations, but bothered more than one conservative pilot. We grew to accept the hand holding friendship, but the act always embarrassed me. I would fly with

Rashan many times, particularly when accompanying Vang Pao and his bodyguards.

It was still the hot, smoky season, a period detrimental to both humans and the machinery we flew. Maintenance problems always cropped up unexpectedly at this time of year. Engine failures, along with main and tail rotor blade erosion, were more prevalent. The fine, abrasive dust churned up during takeoff, landing, and taxiing increased parts wear and impacted impeller blade root recesses, which led to increased vibration levels. Clogged oil cooler fins fostered high engine temperatures.

Crew dehydration was also a problem that along with stress, caused fatigue and could negatively influence critical judgments. Most crewmembers carried sufficient water for a RON, but contained in five gallon cans, warm and tasting like plastic, it was less than palatable. Hoping the hot season would pass quickly into the cooler rainy season, somehow we made it through each day. Thoughts of an extra ten dollars an hour helped motivate one, but a decidedly Western work ethic was also involved.

All these factors, plus the end of USG fiscal year funding, normally tended to curtail flight time. Sometimes Lawrence would shut me down in the middle of the day. He rationalized this with a poormouth statement that there was not enough money available to fund operations. The first time this occurred, fighting had increased and all thoughts of limiting flying were instantly abandoned. Always curious, when I inquired about the contradiction, Vint indicated that back-door funds, not included in fiscal allocations, were readily available for emergency situations. In contrast to Tony, he always seemed aware of the big picture.

During these downtimes, I learned a little more about Vint, which might have helped form additional rapport between us. I learned that his grandfather, a Wall Street big wig, lived on Gresham Road around the corner from my parents. When I queried Dad, he indicated that he often offered Vint's grandfather a ride to the Netherwood train station where they rode the Central Jersey commuter train to its terminus together, and then boarded the ferry to New York City in the morning. Then I recalled that the obviously wealthy man lived in a large stone house, where I had solicited him to purchase tickets to Troop-15 Boy Scout functions in the past. Yes, it indeed was a small world.

PDJ

Political coups always spawned increased tensions and presented an opportunity for enemy exploitation, particularly during the period leading up to the rainy season. This year, perhaps because of a combination of the coup and Meo presence along logistical supply lines, the enemy began an offensive that within a month effectively rolled up the Plain of Jars, Ban Tha Vieng, and Tha Thom.

After two months of relative inactivity on the Plain, probably partially stimulated by the animosity between the FAN and FAR, the Pathet Lao, noting an advantage and encouraged by their communist handlers, began shelling Phou San on the 26th. Located on a series of hills between Routes-71 and 7, on the northern reaches of the PDJ and Kong Le's headquarters, the strategic area overlooked portions of Route-7 and was occupied by two GM-17 battalions. Just before the attack, an unidentified person in Vientiane ordered the unit's withdrawal and return to the capital. (Loyal to General Kouprasith, the unit had been sorely missed in Vientiane.) These marching orders caused confusion as to what defensive measures to take when an expected

enemy attack commenced. Under heavy infantry and artillery pressure, the group, along with an ADC unit, began to withdraw and was savaged. After the fact, the order for the GM-17's withdrawal was rescinded by major General Kham Kong Vongnarath, and the unit remained on the Plain of Jars under Kong Le's control. Badly mauled and demoralized, the GM was rendered ineffective, and required complete reorganization in an area off the PDJ.

After the FAR retreat, the enemy moved onto Phu San. By mid-day on the 28th, two Pathet Lao battalions held the entire range of hills north of Route-7 and Moung Phanh. While consolidating their gains, the enemy occupied high ground within mortar range of Route-7, which they could easily control or interdict at will. Over a relatively short period, they placed themselves in a position to not only dominate connecting roads between the north and central sectors of the PDJ, but they also obtained a strategically situated observation site overlooking areas as far south as Moung Phanh. From this base camp, they sent patrols to probe the hills between the north and central Plain. ²

During this period, enemy pressure on jointly defended FAR-FAN-Meo sites, at Phou Nong, Ban Pha Ka, San Tiau (VS-02), and areas southeast of Xieng Khouang Ville, dramatically increased in response to recent FAR and Meo operations against Pathet Lao border positions and the southern edge of the Plain of Jars. One

² Segment Sources:
Ken Conboy, 107.
Situation Report-State, 04/26/64.
Leonard Unger to State, 04/26/64.
Situation Report-State, 04/28/64.
Leonard Unger to State, 05/05/64.
Telegram State, 05/06/64.
Ambassador Unger to State, 06/05/64.
Victor Anthony, 99.

concern was the potential threat of a Neutralist unit defecting in the Phu Khe area, and leaving the invasion path open to Tha Thom.

In preparation for countering enemy movement, I moved people around locally. Because of the area smoke and haze, I was extremely happy for the easy work. Flight time peaked on Saturday the 25th when I flew ten plus hours. Loaded with people, their goods, and some animals, many shuttles were conducted between Ban Na and Sam Tong.

On my last day upcountry, a mission from Long Tieng took me to Ban Vieng (VS-89), located in the mountains twenty five miles east of Bouam Long. Like the neighboring site at Ban Song (VS-29), several Meo positions north of Ban Ban were supported by Air America aircraft. I was beginning to note that when attacks and enemy pressure occurred in one area, Vang Pao would create a diversion and attempt to shift attention to other areas. While still engaged in the guerrilla phase of the war, this tactic often succeeded and exposed an enemy weakness: that of not possessing significant mobility to pursue Meo fighters in the mountains.

The latest fighting and recent capture of the Phu San positions effectively divided Kong Le's forward defensive lines at Moung Phan from his northwesterly Moung Kheung holdings. This discouraged direct over flights to Phou Vieng. Actually, we had already abandoned this more direct flight path in the interest of safety. Therefore, bypassing the troubled Plain of Jars, I flew a longer route around the horn (western route) to the site. As Ban Vieng was located east of Route-61, I was obligated to traverse the unimproved logistics footpath leading from Sam Neua into the Ban Ban Valley, where it ended at Route-7. This was largely academic, for it was impossible to pinpoint



Ban Na (Site-15) located north of Sam Tong in the mountains and not far from the Plain of Jars. Landings were not always successful there, as evidenced by this crashed Caribou.

the artery in the haze and jungle mass, or from altitude. After delivering people and supplies, and working the area, I stopped at Bouam Long for a load of passengers and then moved on to Long Tieng.

A PROCESS OF MATURATION

Since upgrading to Captain the previous June, while flying long distances, I experienced varying degrees of anxiety regarding potential engine failures, particularly during the highly taxing hot season. As opposed to short flights and local shuttles that kept me busy and afforded little time to consider the down side of flying in the mountains, these concerns occurred mainly during long flights north over the worst imaginable terrain.

The first phase in acquiring my Southeast Asian war games Ph.D. involved engine failures, while flying at altitude over miles of endless terrain, where no forced landing areas were readily visible. Thus far, those pilots who had already experienced engine failures were always successful in discovering a spot to land. However, many failures occurred on takeoff. Gravity drop took over at that point, affording few options. Former Army pilots like Howard Estes, possessing an abundance of training in practice and actual touchdown autorotations, skillfully handled their engine failures. Despite one successful autorotation after a partial engine failure into a rice paddy under my belt, I believed that such an encounter in the mountains would be greatly influenced by "Lady Luck's" time and place, and I was not overly confident in my ability to influence its outcome.

Once away from refugee areas at Sam Tong and its vicinity, where slash and burn agriculture provided many open, but very steep hilly areas, the heavily forested mountains merged into



Steep mountainside south of Long Tieng, Laos, displaying harsh terrain overlooking a river and evidence of slash and burn type agriculture employed by Meo clans. Open areas such as this were rare sights during the early days of flying in heavily forested Military Region Two.

Author Collection.

seemingly endless seas of green, continuous ridgelines that afforded few openings large enough to accommodate a large helicopter. Remembering my squadron mate Jack Durrant's experience in crashing vertically through the trees and injuring his back during an East Coast cross-country, I had little appetite to duplicate such a maneuver. Terrain was not encouraging. Deep, narrow ravines lay between ridges, but these were also heavily forested, steep, and rarely level at the bottom. In addition, late in the day, with the sun low on the horizon, gullies were half shrouded in shadow. An alternative to attempted forced landings in such a hostile environment was to employ the numerous rivers flowing through the area. But, depending on the season, rivers presented the danger of coping with swift currents, large rocks, and deep cold water. Still, because rivers afforded visible open and reasonably level terrain, I preferred to follow them when able. The silver ribbons provided a proven aid to navigation when smoky season conditions severely limited visibility.

After climbing to altitude and establishing a pre-determined course, except for minor cyclic (called cyclic feathering in the trade) or heading corrections, there was little else to do but peer out and down, and consider the worst possible scenario should the engine fail. At such times, the question would invariably arise, "*Where would I go if the engine quit?*" Most of the time there never was an acceptable answer. The situation was not one instilled by fear, but out of respect for the working environment. An upside was that my concern kept me alert, and constantly scanning the instruments for evidence of a pending problem.

A second phase in my aviation education in Laos began when hostilities increased. During this period, I relegated the engine failure potential to the far recesses of my mind, and

worried more about being shot by small or larger caliber weapons. Normally such danger could be minimized at sufficient altitude, and by flying an established circuit around known bad guy locations. However, when challenged with unfamiliar areas, without benefit of a map or briefing, and with a language barrier, apprehension would fester and grow. Of course, weather always constituted a factor in hostile areas. Low clouds and rain often necessitated lower flight levels, which sometimes forced me into small arms range. No one compelled us to fly in bad weather. It was normally a personal decision and somewhat of a challenge to continue in inclement conditions. Unless padding time, something frowned on by management and probably done by only a few pilots, one did not earn additional money for taking risks, and this usually dictated a pilot's final decision to fly in weather.

For some time, while transitioning toward an increasing comfort level, I rotated through these phases, until having thoroughly learned the area and its vagaries, I virtually stopped worrying. However, I never ceased cockpit diligence. To negate boredom and pass the time during long flights, I frequently sang popular songs of the day. The only problem with this was that I never could maintain a proper tune. In church choir and grade school, to cover my deficiency, I used to fake singing. Apparently my off key refrains never reached into the cabin section, for no Flight Mechanic ever chided me for the screeching.

At first, complex and often difficult mountain landings equally bothered me. Briefings from either the Customer or indigenous air operations persons rarely included a new landing zone's altitude. They simply did not know the elevation. This was only recorded after the fact, or, if lucky, passed on by a fellow pilot working in the area. As a result, unless journeying

to a strip where a roll on landing could be performed, it was difficult to judge how much weight to carry on the first run. Therefore, unless pressured by the Customer, I found it wise to carry a moderate payload with a full fuel load to first time places. Even then it was easy to encounter trouble.

After experimenting with several different landing approaches, at great peril and stress, I assumed a fatalistic attitude and no longer dwelled on losing an engine during approach. Once committed during a short final, and then having an engine burp, there was little anyone could do other than roll down the mountainside. The sheer sides of hills below many landing zones normally precluded any safe forced landing. While approaching at a low ground speed and at a high pitch setting, anything but perfunctory maneuvering of the machine was all but impossible. Attempting a steep approach into a strong headwind to increase the possibility of an autorotation required additional power, and many times resulted in a near catastrophe. Therefore, I found it more important to reject thoughts of an engine failure, and, with relatively normal winds, conduct a flat, controlled power on approach to a site. This always worked better, enabling me to visually judge a safe rate of closure and maintain adequate power required for the load factor, before losing translational lift. Then, if conditions were not exactly right, and not fully committed, I could turn away from the hill and abort the landing.

Depending on a situation, the phases of anxiety rotated. Through these phases, particularly landing at ultra-high elevations, I came to realize that if I was going to continue to fly in the mountains, then I needed to cease being unduly concerned about losing an engine. And it was obvious that I could not do both. The change did not occur overnight, but with the invincibility of youth, a clear mind, and a good deal of

resolve, I suppressed previous anxiety, became a safer pilot, and actually began to enjoy my work. ³

For some time, we speculated about the mineral content in the country. Because of wars and inaccessibility, much of Laos awaited geological exploration. Although some areas had already been surveyed by French geologists during the colonial era, the findings were kept secret. We did know that Khang Khay and areas around Attapeu had been mined for gold. Of course, as the seat of leftist headquarters, Khang Khay was off limits to Westerners at this time. Still, the lure of the yellow metal continued in my thoughts as I soared over areas I suspected contained the precious ore. Every time I passed a waterfall along the west bank of the Nam Khan south of The Alternate, I salivated. Water cascaded hundreds of feet into deep pools, the bottoms of which I considered a perfect place to search for gold. However, proper scuba equipment and a benign political environment would be necessary to search for and recover the riches I was certain lay waiting there for the right person. At one time, I even considered using a scheduled time off (STO) for such an endeavor. The pipe dream continued until discarded as work increased.

When I returned to Long Tieng with Bouam Long passengers, my replacement was waiting. After briefing the new pilot about what I knew regarding the current situation, and what had transpired during my RON, I left with a sense of trepidation as to what the situation would be the following month in Military Region Two.

³ During thirty-five years and 19,000 hours, operating both reciprocating and turbine engine helicopters, I was fortunate to never experience a complete engine failure. Discounting a modicum of skill, fate, luck, or a combination of all these variables, somebody must have been looking out for me.

A flight to Wattay Airport on Bird and Son Papa Bravo Juliet (PBJ) and C-123 03 X-ray to Udorn completed the five-day RON.

I returned to the Air America facility, where scarce, precious water slowly filled the pool. It appeared there were no leaks in the system and all the machinery worked as planned. Therefore, an official pool opening party was tentatively scheduled for 8 May, with Taipei big wheels expected to attend.

At home, Sang was sufficiently healed and had resumed her "wifely" duties. That is until she attempted to ride the motorbike, and finding herself a bit weak, spun in and injured her leg. While upcountry, I had developed a small cyst on my posterior, probably from the long periods sitting on the H-34 engineers' revenge seat. Although painful to the anal sphincter region, this problem did not prevent me from engaging at month's end in a short CIC-1 test flight and night flying proficiency in Hotel-17 with Elmer Munsell. Knight and Weitz flew the first flight at twilight, so we enjoyed the realism of night landings and non directional beacon-automatic direction finding (NDB-ADF) approaches in total darkness. With a few British fighter-bombers staged at the airfield during the all-but-completed SEATO operation, we enjoyed the benefit of a makeshift tower, and rare radar backup coverage if necessary. Noting that our side could sorely use air strikes across the border, I speculated about if and when American jets would be based in Udorn. With the runway equipped to handle anything up to 707s (these aircraft had landed at the airport some time before), the infrastructure was nearly in place to support a small number of bombers.

POLITICS

Souvanna Phouma continued struggling to form a government

suitable to accommodate Rightists' interests. During the unstable period, amid coup worries, Air America crews continued to overnight in Udorn, which greatly added to area overcrowding and challenged the Club dining room facilities. In planning for some time and in actual practice on the PDJ, Souvanna announced an alliance between the Neutralist and Rightist armies. To implement this, he established a military committee to reorganize the FAR command and control. Functioning as Commander in Chief (CIC), General Ouan was to initially control both forces, which were to eventually merge into one unit. Because of his non-participation and lack of support for the coup, General Phoumi steadily lost political influence and control of his many lucrative enterprises. Following the coup attempt, at Souvanna's urging, he resigned as Minister of Defense, after which he lost his alcohol and gold import monopoly, and his gaming casino was shuttered.

In a country where there was never an abundance of loyalty directed toward the Vientiane central government, the turmoil firmed local leaders' resolve to protect their own interests. Divisions and lack of cooperation between regions was another ongoing problem affecting national unity.

Evolving from ancient geographic and ethnic diversity, the three fractious kingdoms were eventually merged into one. However, this failed to create lasting unity, for after the creation of five military regions, commanding generals acted as representatives of both the Royal Lao Government, while the more influential and elitist families ensconced in their respective regions (General Prasouk Somly in Military Region Four, the Champassak family in that province, and Abhay Kouprasith and the Oudone Sananikone family in Military Region Five). Controlling RLA forces and civilian services in their respective areas, almost as a divine right, those holding important positions

engaged in corruption, nepotism, and favoritism. With dissent on the rise over Vientiane leadership, the commanders in the five military regions steadily gained additional power, catered more to local interests, and even refused to allow their troops to be repositioned to other areas in the country. Throughout the long war, these factors never fully changed, and those that did were accomplished by enlightened individuals and only very slowly.

Within my sphere, one positive aspect of the coup and recent fighting on the Plain of Jars was diminished talk regarding the Air America name change, or crew and aircraft relocation. Other than information that paperwork for a change was still being prepared, the switch appeared to have taken a back seat to reality. It was not difficult to deduce that the coup had placed this issue on the back burner. With the NHL leaders and many Neutralist ministers out of town, there was diminished Air America bashing. I briefly took heart, thinking that we just might make it after all.

Word was received from Taipei headquarters that I would not be upgraded to permanent Captain for some time, if at all. This policy change contained certain perk implications relating to annual leave (I would have accrued twenty five days of vacation time by summer). A permanent Captain enjoyed a full pay allowance while on leave. With the new development, and confident that the Company would survive, I decided not to wait until later in the year, and began planning a vacation home.

Following Meo guerrilla interdiction of several mountainous sections along Route-7 between the North Vietnamese border and the Ban Ban Valley during August 1963, the enemy focused on eliminating threats to their control of this essential line of communication leading to their Plain of Jars base camps. At their own pace, they moved against Meo hilltop strongholds, systematically eliminating them. This was particularly the case south of Route-7, as the area was deemed too close to the border and enemy bases within Laos. A number of Meo sites were lost during this period, but much of the population was denied to the enemy for corvee labor,¹ as, with the help from a timely airlift, refugees were relocated to areas east and south of Long Tieng.²

FLIGHT TO SAFETY

The enemy push to eliminate government forces on and around the Plain of Jars continued in earnest before the rainy season commenced. During the last week in April, concurrent with the loss of Phou San, four enemy battalions (to include three dreaded Vietnamese units) moved against Phou Nong's defenses. Just as the victory at Phu San had achieved additional control of Route-7 and squeezed Kong Le's forces, the attack on Site-71 was calculated to eliminate pesky Meo guerrilla and other government troops from harassing the Ban Ban-Nong Het portions of Route-7. Similar enemy actions had been attempted during the

¹ Corvee. French term for limited forced labor. The communists conscripted tribal people to move war supplies down LOCs and the Ho Chi Minh Trail system.

² Former Chief of Station Vientiane Douglas Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era* (New York: The Free Press, 1977) 157-58.

previous two years, but none consisted of such magnitude and never achieved lasting success.

After moving into the mountains, and encountering stiff resistance, multi battalion enemy forces successfully attained the western heights overlooking Phou Nong. Then, setting up crew-served mortars, gunners commenced firing on the strip and command post.

Exacerbating the friendly situation, the Vientiane coup necessitated the absence of the regimental FAR commander, who was still at Paksane meeting with Vang Pao and General Kham Khong. Therefore, without top military leadership present, by the afternoon of 3 May the friendlies were surrounded and outnumbered by four enemy battalions. With helicopter and fixed wing supply missions no longer feasible, and ammunition perilously low, Major Chong Shoua Yang, Meo commanding officer at the site acted. He contacted his superiors and began planning a mass exodus to the southeast that night. With the breakout underway, enemy units easily overran some of Phou Nong's mixed government force.

FAN units and dependents, totaling about 1,000 souls, fled northwest across the broad Ban Ban Valley. That same day, they arrived at Nam Hom on Route-6, planning to join with other Neutralist units at Moung Khao, to the south of the Meo site at Houei Sa An (VS-23).

Elsewhere, under the cover of dark, thousands of Meo refugees, along with FAR and Meo ADC units, departed Site-71 southeast along paths and trails toward the safety of Moung Mo, with an alternate destination planned further south at Moung Moc.

The evacuation commenced, with one battalion providing a rear guard. Two other battalions probed ahead, and thousands of refugees formed the center of the column. Although while

managing to avoid a main enemy attack, normal security measures consisting of road guards and flanking actions were impossible to achieve along the narrow mountain paths. Consequently, planned enemy ambushes exacted a serious toll on panicked civilian and military personnel alike.

By 4 May, as the main body from Phou Nong struggled to make progress, forward elements of the FAR point regrouped in a grassy bowl east of Moung Ngan, twelve miles northwest of their destination at the Ban Nam Keng rally site. The same day, while refugees straggled into the area, searching planes reported receiving ground fire east of Nam Keng. A food drop was arranged late in the day, but the enemy attacked, killing many additional individuals.

During the arduous thirty mile trip, by the 5th, only twenty five percent of the original refugee group arrived at Nam Keng. During the days of walking, refugees that included women, babies, and the elderly were plagued with enemy ambushes, wanton slaughter, and degradation.

Two days later, an enemy probe precipitated further movement south.³

Prior to Phou Nong's loss, saber rattling had continued in the enemy camp. Souvannaphoung informed the Russian Ambassador and Polish ICC commissioner at Khang Khay that if the political situation was not resolved by 9 May, one or both actions would be taken. The NLHX would push its military arm to capture

³ Bundy to W. Averell Harriman, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, concerning action northeast and southeast PDJ, 04/29/64.

Ken Conboy, 107, 126.

Weldon, Charles, *Tragedy in Paradise: A Country Doctor at War in Laos* (Bangkok: Asia Books, 1999) 125,127.

Ahern, Tom, *Udercover Armies: the CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos 1961-1973* (Washington, 2006), 190-191.

Vientiane, and or establish a separate, but legitimate government.

Speculation centered on implementation of Pathet Lao contingency plans to move toward the Mekong River should the Revolutionary Committee continue to exert its total will on Vientiane politics and Souvanna Phouma's government. One offensive scenario included a two-pronged sally down Route-4, the Tha Thom and Paksane corridor to the Mekong lowlands, and then using the Route-13 artery north to the capital. The other more direct route went down Routes-7/13 through Moung Soui, Sala Phu Khoun, and south to Ban Vieng and Vientiane. The well-positioned and large buildup of enemy forces near Tha Thom lent more credence and potential to attacks through that area. ⁴

ICC information paved the way for a meeting at Khang Khay between Souvanna Phouma and his half-brother. As reported by General Phoumi, the meeting was largely unproductive. At the meeting, Souvannaphong reiterated his accusation that the American military was working for the Meo. Souvanna noted that the situation appeared calm on the 4th, but the PL/NVA build up required FAN reinforcement in addition to the hundreds of government troops lifted to the PDJ prior to the coup.

Kong Le's forces were seemingly well equipped to defend their positions. Prior to the coup, they were provided with two months' supply of ammunition and POL to operate their vehicles. An additional thirty days of supplies were staged at Peppergrinder, DEPCHIEF's large munition holding area south of Udorn, awaiting delivery by Air America aircraft. Other FAN

⁴ Vientiane embassy message traffic to Washington, LBJ Library, 05/01/64.
CIA Information Cable, 05/05/64.

weapons seized by FAR during the coup were to be released and sent to the Plain of Jars.

PEPPERGRINDER

In September 1962, before Geneva Accords July protocols were completely implemented, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma forwarded a letter to Ambassador Unger requesting that Air America planes continue overt assistance to FAR and FAN military units. Covert support would continue on a small scale to select paramilitary guerrillas and intelligence gathering teams. The assistance resulted in the downing of an Air America plane in November 1962 while conducting an RLG and embassy-authorized supply run to Kong Le's troops at the Xieng Khouang Airport on the Plain of Jars.

During October, USG, wisely hedging its bets should the communists fail to honor the Geneva Accords, acted accordingly. Giving rise to a gray area in the neutral country, new contracts were signed between Air America representatives and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), replacing previous Air Force contracts. The innovative contracts, obscured under the cover of humanitarian activities, allowed continued air transport of military supplies to the RLA cadres and soldiers in the CIA tribal program. Although most likely overlapping in nature, the missions were logged under both Peppergrinder (DOD) and AB-1 (CIA) auspices.

After all U.S. MAAG personnel departed Laos in October 1962, Deputy Chief, JUSMAG Thailand (DEPCHIEF) was created in Bangkok, ostensibly as a Military Assistance Program to Thailand, but actually to fill the void for MAP Laos. In order to assess RLA requirements and coordinate military assistance forwarded from Department of Defense Thailand, a Requirements Office (USAID/RO), similar to the old Programs Evaluation Office

(PEO), was embedded in USAID Laos. Like the PEO, RO was staffed by "retired" military officers and supplemented by third-country specialists. Therefore, like the U.S. Operations Mission (USOM) before, USAID served as an acceptable conduit to funnel military supplies to the RLG.

Peppergrinder was one clandestine logistic operation formed in Thailand to channel military and paramilitary aid to friendly RLG units. Located in a huge area that stored varied munitions, it was staffed by a detachment from DEPCHIEF. Other such holding areas or waypoint sites administered by DEPCHIEF were located at the Don Muang Redcap warehouse ⁵ and at port Sattahip, where abundant Department of Defense supplies entered the country by ship. Under provisions of the USAID contract, Vientian-based Air America C-123s shuttled Peppergrinder supplies from Udorn into Laos on an "on call" basis, which appreciably increased in 1964 with the advent of the RLAFF T-28 program, and increased FAR activity. Bookkeeping for billing purposes and supply origin (DOD or CIA Kadena, Okinawa stocks) was complicated, but as all items were generally derived from USG funding, it was relatively insignificant. ⁶

MOUNG SOUI

Not actually considered part of the expansive Plain of Jars plateau, but adjacent to and tucked into relatively flat recesses prior to reaching mountainous terrain to the west,

⁵ In 1960, Air America shared part of this facility to perform maintenance on Company aircraft.

⁶ Segment sources:
Leonard Unger to State, 05/05/64.
Telegram State, 05/06/64.
Vientiane to State, 05/07/64.
Ken Conboy, 113.
Joe Leeker, Military Aid, 21- 26.

Moung Soui served as headquarters of the 14th FAN battalion. The broad, rolling grassy hill area, supporting a long hard packed dirt strip, constituted a fallback region for FAN Plain of Jars units, and acted as a theoretical blocking point to prevent westward movement of enemy rolling stock on Route-7. American advisors believed the Moung Soui group was the only unit not cooperating with the Pathet Lao in some manner. However, this notion was largely dispelled when Vang Pao's people reported several hundred Pathet Lao, dressed in two piece faded khaki uniforms, infiltrated southwest through a ville west of Moung Soui and south of Route-7. General Vang Pao believed the unit was on the move toward the 7/13 road junction at Sala Phou Khoun to link up with Pathet Lao battalions already staged west along Route-7 and south of Route-13.

Because of a distinct possibility that the enemy would soon move to push the FAN off the Plain of Jars, the Agency recalled Kong Le's former advisor to act as a mediator and to persuade the Neutralist leader to meet with Vang Pao at Sam Tong. No one attended the meeting except the two principals and respective guards monitoring the hut's exterior. Details of the meeting were initially kept secret. While a debriefing took place at Long Tieng later in the afternoon, Pop, believing his refugees would be involved, went to The Alternate attempting to learn something. However, Vang Pao kept mum, divulging only to his Case Officer that because of the logistics involved, if the FAN were ejected from the Plain, he would offer Kong Le's forces safety in the hills controlled by the Meo around Ban Na. ⁷

At the Air America facility in Udorn, the grand opening pool party staged for big wigs from Taipei was delayed until

⁷ Ken Conboy, 108.
Blaine Jensen Letter, 04/29/96.

further notice. However, this did not prevent people from swimming and enjoying sun bathing and lounging privileges.

Except for those individuals like Scratch Kanach assisting in the CPH office, there were no personnel dedicated specifically to handle line maintenance test flight work. Should Wayne or Scratch be absent for whatever reason, consistent with the CPH's philosophy, line pilots were required to test fly aircraft just out of maintenance. Therefore, I spent much of Thursday the 7th attempting to place CIC-4 in airworthy condition. This was an unpleasant, sweaty task any time of the year, but still deep into the hot season, spending time on the laterite parking ramp was particularly oppressive.

UPCOUNTRY

Two days later, I deadheaded upcountry on B-851. This time, the PIC in the left seat was the popular fixed wing driver Captain Tony Durrizi. The Caribou had a fold-up observation bucket seat (called a jump seat) at the cockpit's entrance. As there was no objection to my occupying the seat, I took advantage of it to watch crew procedures and techniques used while flying the plane. Since undergoing fixed wing training at Pensacola, I had never felt the urge to fly airplanes, preferring helicopters for their versatility, ability to observe at reasonable altitudes, and ability to perform various types of non-boring tasks. However, hedging my bets, because one never knew what the future would hold, I attempted to learn all I could about the larger planes.

I had yet to experience a fixed wing approach and landing at Long Tieng from within the cockpit of a large STOL aircraft. The long, unimproved dirt and grass strip in the valley sloped upward to the northwest, where towering karsts and a narrow western gap generally dissuaded a wise pilot from any thoughts

of a go-around. Therefore, the initial landing attempt had to suffice. Utilizing the entire runway for a rollout necessitated a touchdown close to the approach end of the runway. In order to accomplish this the approach path to landing was necessarily steep. Immediately after clearing the south gap, the pilot in command dove into the bowl toward the runway. At the last moment, he executed a hairy flare before touching down. The first time I experienced this maneuver my heart pounded mightily and seemed to rise to my throat. The landing procedure, although impressive, never endeared me to fixed wing flying in the unforgiving mountains. I preferred the attributes of my slow, controlled flying machine.

Current action on the Plain of Jars was fluid, and situation reports often difficult to assess or substantiate. This was highlighted when ICC reports to Vientiane from Kong Le's camp stated that enemy forces had rolled up a Neutralist position at Phu Theung, a 5,200 foot hill overlooking Route-4 at the western throat of the Xieng Khouang Ville valley. Furthermore, mixed Pathet Lao-Vietminh battalions were supposedly moving west toward Ban Ton, and were expected to reach Neutralist headquarters at Moung Phanh, eight miles northwest by that evening. At first, a panicky Kong Le requested an immediate evacuation of the ICC team from his position, and assistance from the Geneva-sponsored organization. Following subsequent investigation, like many initial field action reports, ICC representatives revealed the situation to be less threatening than previously portrayed, and stated that Moung Phanh was in no immediate danger. However, occupation of the eastern strategic position, together with the one at Phu San did

provide a launching site for the enemy to later attack Moung Phanh.⁸

In addition to hints of Plain of Jars hostilities surfacing, during an abbreviated FIC briefing, I learned additional details concerning Phou Nong's defeat, and the peoples' subsequent retreat. I caught a ride to Sam Tong to assume command of Hotel Foxtrot with one of my favorite Flight Mechanics, "C" Decosta. I would quickly learn that "C" was an amazing person. Where other Flight Mechanics would take twice as long to refuel, he could organize an indigenous fueling crew and hand pump three to four barrels into the tanks within a twenty minute period (remember: time was money).

During a refueling stop at The Alternate, I engaged in my normal hustle and bustle in preparation to fly another four hours. While "C" attended to refueling, as was customary during shutdowns, I performed the customary urination under the ship's aft fuselage and then conducted a quick counter clockwise inspection, looking for obvious signs of oil, gas, or hydraulic leaks. Then I hurried to the administration hut to build and choke down a refreshing glass of hot Ovaltine, well laced with energy-producing condensed milk.

One day during such a hectic period, chief AB-1 Customer, Bill Lair arrived in Captain Bob Hamblin's Bird Air Dornier to confer with Vang Pao, and assess the situation unfolding to the east. I recognized Bill, who appeared to me much like a bespectacled college professor I might have encountered at Duke, but I never had the opportunity to meet him before. As Bob introduced Bill Lair, I was immediately impressed by his soft-spoken and courteous manner that contrasted with his gruff

⁸ Vientiane Embassy to State, 05/06/64, 06/04/64.



Standing clockwise beside the Dornier at Long Tieng, AB-1 Customer Bill Lair, Case Officer Mike Lynch, Bird pilot Bob Hamblin, and Air America helicopter Captain Charlie Weitz.

Bob Davis Collection.

assistant, Pat Landry, and the rough-hewn Tony Poe. We did not have long to chat.

True to form, reliable "C" completed a quick fueling turn around. Therefore, re-energized by the sweet drink and anxious to continue to march, I started for the door. Time indeed represented money, and as I did not pad time, I had to take advantage of the good weather to maintain a decent daily averageflight time. Padding of flight time ⁹ had become largely an item of the past for most pilots. Even though we still logged shutdown legs, normally, but not always involving refueling stops, we were required to separately keep track of all landing sites. In all but the most hazardous situations, this process necessitated additional record keeping and minimally delayed operations. We were also informed that the Customer was keeping track of our time intervals off and back to Site-20 during local missions. This was all right with me, but the mere fact that we were being observed was uncomfortable. Of course, this was not applicable while working out of northern sites.

While passing through the door, I overheard Lair remark to Hamblin in low tones, "*That guy really works hard.*" I did not know Lair well at the time, but respecting his exalted position, considered the statement regarding my work ethic a supreme compliment. Little did he realize that money generally influenced my prime motivation, and represented the common denominator at the time. However, I was not yet cognizant that other aspects of the job and intangible rewards were creeping into my psyche, and slowly overcoming my primary desire to accumulate dollars.

⁹ Padding: "White collar" larceny, illegally logging flight time not actually flown.

Late in the day, Hotel-Foxtrot was recalled for a periodic maintenance inspection and I assumed command of Hotel-12 with guitar-playing John Sibal filling out my crew.

ANOTHER EVACUATION

The following morning Sam Jordon and I were assigned to shuttle Phou Nong refugees--women, children, the elderly, and infirm--from Moung Moc (VS-46) to areas providing safety, sustenance, and medical assistance. Like the previous year's evacuation, first flights were conducted to Sam Tong, and then to a hastily erected tent city at Moung Cha (VS-113).

Recent enemy attacks on Site-71 had scattered the people and perpetrated the largest refugee movement since I began working in the country. During several difficult days of walking over treacherous footpaths, people streamed south and southwest. After the third night, a few people were overtaken by a vengeful, mean-spirited enemy, who harangued and encouraged them to return to Phou Nong to serve as corvee labor for their supply lines. Not wanting any part of that kind of servitude, they continued to flee, while being continuously harassed and ambushed both day and night. Pop, who frequently resorted to his particular brand of hyperbole, later indicated that on the way to Moung Mo (later designated LS-182), some women were so fatigued and panicked by depravities committed by the Vietnamese and Pathet Lao ambushes that they threw babies off cliffs to avoid capture or death. Others too weak to continue were savagely raped or hacked to death with machetes. Although later disputed and actually never totally verified, there were initial estimates of over 1,200 souls massacred. Although other unpleasant flights from harm's way had occurred throughout Meo history, this particular exodus marked one of the first calculated by the enemy to punish and inflict an especially

harsh lesson on a people, who had moved steadily south from China for tens of decades, and were certainly aware of others' inhumanity.

After they paused in the grassy Moung Mo bowl to briefly relax, re-group, patch up bloody feet, and tally survivors, Americans and Vang Pao, tracking refugee progress from planes, determined the low area too exposed and readily accessible to enemy attack. The area also lacked a useable STOL strip to evacuate those unable to walk much farther.

After resting, the people were encouraged to move ten-miles south to Moung Moc. Deemed considerably safer, the larger site was located at a higher elevation within a narrow valley, twenty miles east of Tha Thom, where improved security and a rudimentary dirt strip were available. After enduring more than a week of the horrible exodus, the people had arrived at Site-46.

Thus began four days of the most intensive refugee movement and excitement in which I had ever participated. The character of refugee evacuations rarely changed in the almost twelve years I worked with the mountain people in Laos. Human nature dictated the level of chaos, and fear level was proportional to enemy proximity. The closer the enemy, the more difficult the people were to control. Additionally, individuals tended to become more rowdy when faced with the prospect of riding on an aircraft to safety or having to walk days or weeks to reach a secure area.

Standard AID policy dictated women, babies, small children, and the elderly were the first evacuees. The people were organized into family units and instructed as to what personal belongings could be carried. One major problem involved family separation. If an aircraft was full, mothers were informed the remaining children would be hauled on the next plane or helicopter. Maternal instinct, being what it is, many times they

refused to believe this and hopped off the aircraft or attempted to pull the last person onboard.

In other cases, they wanted to transport their precious goods and animals: pigs, chickens, and ducks. Unaware of the final destination, they considered their animals the only source of meat and eggs available. During the early years, they also wanted to carry rice, for they did not believe the handlers when informed that the staple would be provided at the new location.

In a particularly dire situation, loaders had to be vigilant for imposters, for terrified young men would accept disgrace and dress in woman's clothing to flee. However, after proper organization and briefing, most of the time people listened, took orders, and were orderly.¹⁰

During our first trip into the site, no leader stepped forward, nor did any semblance of organization exist while loading the cabin section. There was just a collective burning desire to get out of Dodge City. After the inevitable milling and mobbing at the cabin door, I shut down and assisted Blackie Mondello in the loading process. Fortunately, because the people were so exhausted from the Phou Nong trek, we encountered a minimum of resistance in performing this task. Furthermore, they were intelligent enough to realize they were going nowhere if I was not in the cockpit.

Since my fuel load was still high and the site elevation about the same as Sam Tong, we loaded what I estimated between 1,000 to 1,500 pounds. Then, despite planning a downhill rolling takeoff to minimize power required for takeoff, I attempted to hover and further judge the payload potential. If I could hover, and there was sufficient power available, unless the cabin was

¹⁰ Blaine Jensen Letter.

"cubed out," bulkhead to bulkhead and deck to ceiling, I added a soul or two.

After conducting the first lift, I found the short Moung Moc strip much disused and in horrible shape. The surface was rough, marked with potholes, ruts, and exposed stones from past rainy season erosion. The roll off was extremely uncomfortable, with intense lateral bouncing that was certainly detrimental to the main gear and fuselage. Therefore, I attempted to attain flight soon after achieving translational lift. After staggering into the air and climbing to a minimum safe altitude, I teamed up with and followed Sam Jordon sixty seven miles to Sam Tong. We judiciously skirted low ground around portions of Tha Thom, which Neutralist units still held, but where fighting was reportedly about to commence.

While unloading at Site-20, Sam and I briefed Pop and other AID workers regarding an urgent requirement for authoritative people at Moung Moc to help organize and control the people, who continuously streamed in from the north. We also requested an emergency fuel delivery to better plan and conduct our shuttles. Movement of these items was accomplished by us and participating Helio Courier pilots during return trips. Soon we had enough fuel stockpiled to eliminate further trips to Sam Tong.

Since the previous month, many refugees from Plain of Jars areas had inundated limited Sam Tong facilities and were not completely resettled to southern sites. Obviously, Pop and his meager staff were unable to cope with such a large influx of fresh refugees, so our destination was changed to the sprawling Moung Cha valley south of the awe inspiring heights of Phu Bia. Supporting a large cattle and agriculture economy, we referred to the Moung Cha area of lush, rolling hills as "VP's Farm." Besides providing adequate space for thousands of unfortunate

people, the trips eliminated the twenty mile flight to Sam Tong, enabling us to fly an extra trip.

Throughout the day, a sense of excitement seemed to pervade our operational area. As I became more comfortable with Hotel-12's capability, helicopter overloading assumed second place to the more important task at hand--that of removing the maximum number of people from harm's way. Because of the evacuation's emergency nature and pressure to remove all those unable to proceed on their own (no one knew the exact location of the enemy), the long distances flown, and the limited number of roundtrips conducted during a day, Blackie and I attempted to carry as many people and their goods as the H-34 cabin section would accommodate. Excluding babies, on one trip, after becoming airborne with considerable difficulty, Mondello counted or estimated twenty nine adults and children. I knew we were heavy because the air-oil oleo pistons flattened out on the struts as we careened down the strip and it took longer achieving sufficient lift to stagger into a flight configuration. During such times, I prayed that the engine would sustain the high power demand, and hoped no one had forced their way into the electronics compartment to disrupt Hotel-12's center of gravity. Finally considering it too frustrating, I ceased asking the Flight Mechanic for the number of souls onboard, as the myriad of household items and wicker baskets containing chickens blocked his view and prevented an accurate count.

RON AT LONG TIENG

Carefully timing our shuttles, we worked close to dark. Captain Elmer Munsell had arrived earlier at Sam Tong to replace Jordon. As it was too late for Sam to obtain a ride south, he was obligated to RON. This, coupled with the additional number of disgruntled Helio Courier pilots participating in the

evacuation, saturated the Sam Tong crew hut. Because of a lack of accommodations, I was sent to Long Tieng for the night. Although familiar with the segmented facility from numerous refueling at The Alternate, it represented my first RON in the combination administration, operations, radio, and storage hut. PARU Captain Makorn was at his best. Much like a mother hen caring for her chicks, he shared warm Japanese Sapporo beer, along with the standard Thai fare of rice and weeds.

I quickly discovered that RON's were more fun with Tony in attendance, for the burly, colorful man really seemed to enjoy the company of flight crews. Always dominating the conversation, he provided enough charisma and bovine scatology to last me a long time. After enjoying a couple of brews, which immediately affected my dehydrated body, he lifted his green fatigue shirt displaying an ugly scar from a nasty stomach wound, incurred "hitting the beach" as a young Marine at Iwo Jima. With him, everything in life was either painted black or white. There was nothing in between. Although overly positive about what he firmly believed, I enjoyed the big guy's skewed enthusiasm, philosophy, outlook about the war, and its various aspects.

Sated following the rice dinner, our conversation trailed off and did not continue much longer. After Tony staggered off into the night to his hut across the runway, I took advantage of a cot Makorn offered, for I was fatigued from the long, arduous day, and we all had to arise at "dark thirty" for a second day of refugee evacuation.

Refugee shuttles continued nonstop, but the real heart-pounding excitement did not occur until near dark. Munsell became my new partner, and we attempted to accompany each other during shuttles.

This was Elmer's final RON upcountry for several years. He was leaving shortly for Katmandu, Nepal, to join Jerry McEntee

working on loan with Air Ventures, Inc., a remote area aviation specialist company. Over a three year period flying in the Himalaya Mountains in a "G" model Bell, they worked on such USAID projects as forestry, irrigation, and refugee relief. At the time, individuals from the American Embassy rode to various sites to check on AID projects. On a few occasions these flights assumed a dual purpose, like landing with a battery at listening posts at the 18,000 foot level to keep a sharp eye on Chinese border activities.

The seemingly better-organized evacuation slipped smoothly into a mode of complacency. Sufficient Helio Courier and H-34 fuel was made available during the day to sustain the mammoth undertaking. There was no lack of helpers to refuel or load the aircraft, for the removal of the people became so urgent that everyone pitched in to help in whatever task was required. Once the majority of people realized that we represented salvation after the horrible abuse of the past days from enemy killer squads formed especially to terrorize them, their trust and good humor returned, and they began to smile once again. I had to admire such a sturdy people who, much like our ancestors, settling America, were struggling under the worst possible conditions.

OUT ON A LIMB

Moung Cha trips consumed about an hour, including loading, necessarily slow flights because of high gross loads, and unloading. With higher speeds, empty return trips were conducted in considerably less time. It was late afternoon when Elmer and I elected to squeeze in one final shuttle, and reserve enough time to return to Sam Tong by twilight. The weather had been good along our flight track the entire day, but with sunset projected at 1829 hours (because of high mountains it always got

dark earlier than on the flatlands), everything had to work out perfectly to meet our schedule.

From previous experience working in the area, I had observed that generally around four o'clock, when the dew point spread rapidly narrowed, clouds either formed or settled on mountain ridges immediately south of Phu Bia. This rendered flight over the hills impossible. For this reason, we learned to employ various other routes over saddles, cuts, and gaps through valleys to circumnavigate the obstacles and return to base. This day was no exception.

On the way back to Site-113, with clouds already hanging low over our flight path, after leaving the river valley containing Ban Tha Vieng and clearing buffering mountains, we descended into the two long segmented valleys leading to Moung Cha. The first contained Moung Oum (VS-22), an early resistance site used by French and Meo ADC units before the White Star days. A high gap that separated the Moung Oum Valley from Moung Cha required negotiating to reach our destination. As clouds partially obscured the gap, I circled to allow Elmer sufficient clearance to scoot through a small opening before I attempted the same. By the time I crossed into the Moung Cha Valley, Elmer had already discharged his load and was preparing to head north for the "backdoor" gap behind Pha Khao, the nearest through point leading to Long Tieng or Sam Tong.

By the time I unloaded, it was already twilight, with the dark cloak of night fast descending into this portion of the mountains. It was obvious to me that in our zest to haul more people, our last trip proved ill advised. We were not encouraged to fly at night in the mountains--emergency only. The reasons were obvious and many, including the entire spectrum of single engine capability, lack of SAR assets, flight following, and a rumored enemy inclination to fly supply missions at night.

After launching, weather conditions did not look good to the north, and I could barely see Elmer's ship in the distance. Had more time been available before dark, I would have flown southwest down the extended valley. Then, using valleys and streambeds previously committed to memory during inclement conditions, headed west toward the Nam Moh refugee village and north to Site-20A. However, on this particular day this was not an option. As planned, there was adequate separation between the two helicopters should Elmer need to reverse course because of impenetrable weather conditions. He popped through the gap with no trouble. By the time I negotiated the gap, the world in front of me was black and inhospitable. When I called Munsell on the Fox Mike frequency, he indicated that he was descending ten miles from the south gap at Long Tieng. I thought that I glimpsed his running lights in the distance, but was not certain. I had never flown at night in this area, and my perception of the surroundings assumed a weird twist. Mainly, nothing looked familiar. While flashing by the dark specter of ragged mountain tops at altitude, I was unable to identify a single checkpoint, or any other visual clue to help me locate and follow Elmer into Long Tieng.

Fighting a rising panic, I climbed to 8,000 feet, where at least I was sure there were no higher obstacles ahead of me. I felt safe for the moment, and began to retrench and consider my options. However, at that altitude the immediate area was even less familiar. I continued northwest toward the Long Tieng bowl, but, like the proverbial black hole, the entire valley was enveloped in darkness. Attempts to raise Elmer or Tony on any radio frequency were nil. I do not believe Tony possessed a ground-to-air radio that he monitored at night, and he likely was not aware of my problem. However, it was different with Elmer. It was difficult to understand why he did not attempt to

contact me. Granted the man was a confirmed loner, but common sense and decency dictated that he remain on the air to talk me in, provide an ultra high frequency (UHF) steer, or display a landing light to illuminate the runway. With no assistance, and little experience or proficiency flying in the mountains at night, I was not going to attempt a descent into that pitch-black void.

Plan "B," if I chose to implement it, would have included turning south toward the Vientiane flatlands and Wattay Airport. I rejected this option, for beside the embarrassment involved in explaining this move, I lacked sufficient fuel.

Plan "C," if a viable plan, included continuing west to intersect the Nam Ngum and then attempt to find refuge at Sam Tong or another friendly site that was actually visible and not immersed in a deep bowl. (I had not yet formulated Plan "D.") At least I was not lost, just perplexed. By the time I reached the Nam Ngum, a partial moon peeking in and out of high clouds reflected friendly light off the silvery ribbon of river. Derived from a source on the northern Plain of Jars, in my area the Ngum River flowed generally south through deep ravines past Sam Tong and Long Tieng, which always provided a reference and conduit through the mountains during good and bad weather. Now, in this situation, I could use it again to hopefully save my bacon. Should it become necessary, in the extreme, I could follow it all the way to the Plain of Jars. However, because of current hostilities and with enemy patrols wandering throughout the area at will, this was the least desirable option.

During a recent 'operations normal' report--sometimes a misnomer--I established that the Delta radio operator had not secured his equipment for the night. Therefore, I asked the man to remain on the air and ensure that the non-directional beacon (NDB) was operating properly. I knew that after properly tuning

and identifying the station on the dim cockpit pedestal, the short-range NDB would display a bearing toward Ban Na and the vicinity of Sam Tong. Then, at a pre-determined point in space, normally ninety degrees to the station, I could turn inbound until the head of the automatic direction finding (ADF) needle pointed directly toward the base or station. (At least I had learned that much during VFR navigation and instrument training at Pensacola.) This was preferable, for in lieu of homing directly toward the station (aligning the nose of the aircraft with the head of the needle and flying directly toward the station), this would provide clearance west of the seven thousand footers located at Site-72. With renewed confidence, I headed north up the river.

Next, I raised Udorn on the high frequency radio and talked to someone who sounded like much like CJ Abadie over the scratchy net. Perhaps Ab was transitioning back to Udorn from his Taipei stint, or merely visiting the facility on a periodic fact-finding trip. I calmly informed the person of my situation and intentions. At a time when I needed a friendly voice and reassurance, his reply seemed especially cold and unconcerned, but one expected that from Abadie.

Looking toward what I believed was Sam Tong, a dark and uninviting void discouraged any decision on my part to descend into the dubious declivity that afforded no illumination or radio contact. Therefore, I elected to continue and attempt a landing at Ban Na.

Oriented along a north-south axis at 4,600 feet mean sea level (MSL), the Lima Site-15 airstrip perched on an isolated ridgeline. Like other sites, it was ringed with mountains, but they afforded considerable lateral separation from the main site. Site-15 lay in a less abbreviated bowl, but one that still required a descent below hills. Next, I considered that I might

need help identifying the position. I talked to the Thai or Lao English speaker operating the radio station, and explained my intentions to land and RON at his house. Highly cooperative, he indicated it was raining moderately at his station. I inquired if he had drummed fuel available. Affirmative. I then asked if he could prepare one to ignite and roll down the strip when he heard me overhead. To my relief, he again answered in the affirmative and restored my confidence of positively identifying his position and landing safely.

When I believed that I was far enough upriver, past the highest obstructions to the east, I commenced a starboard (right) turn until the helicopter's nose was aligned with the head of the ADF needle, and homed directly toward Ban Na. I reestablished contact with the radio operator and confirmed that he was prepared to illuminate the strip. To ensure obstacle clearance, I maintained my 8,000 foot cruise level and requested that he alert me upon hearing the characteristic wop-wop of the helicopter blades slapping the air.

At the appropriate time, the man rolled the drum down strip and lighted the stream of gasoline. Turning night into day well below me, like a finger pointing the way, flames outlined the right side of the strip in the most wonderful light display I ever saw. With salvation at hand, I slowed and dropped the collective to hastily descend 3,400 feet to the ground before the fire completely extinguished.

The intelligent radio operator had been correct in assessing the local weather conditions. Rain pelted the glass windscreen, and the inadequate wipers only partially cleared the moisture. Then, unexpectedly, the mythical Murphy reared his ugly head. During the rapid descent, the temperature change and one hundred percent humidity caused the inside of the cockpit windows to completely fog over, obscuring my forward vision. The

only way I could see the ground was by poking my head out the window, but while doing this, I was blinded by driving rain. Finally, after slowing to a ground speed calculated to barely keep the aircraft moving, and adding sufficient power to keep from falling out of the sky, I increased right pedal to yaw the nose and minimize the rain's impact on my face. The method worked. It was far from a pretty approach, but with Blackie's assistance, I was able to land midway up the rain-lashed strip. The complete exercise culminated forty-five anxious minutes in that nasty, inhospitable black air.

Breathing a sigh of relief, with the red low fuel light glowing menacingly, I taxied up the muddy thirty-five-degree inclined runway to a semi-flat loading area at the top in the vicinity of the radio shack. Failing to contact Udorn on the high frequency (HF) net, I secured my trusty machine for the night. I had had enough fun that day.

After exiting the cockpit, I stood for a moment on wobbly knees. ¹¹ I did not kneel and kiss the wet earth like portrayed in the movies, as the ground was far too nasty for that. Naturally, I was elated to be safe on terra firma. After recovering my composure, I profusely thanked the Man upstairs and then the top-notch radio operator for his assistance. I am not sure if he ever realized how much he contributed to saving our bacon that night, or the extent of my indebtedness to him. The slate was wiped clean.

I recalled the numerous times I had been unable to make contact with Delta for an operations normal report. Curses would then echo in my cockpit. However, poor communications were not the radio operator's fault. It was a serious shortcoming of an

¹¹ Wobbly Knees: A physical state that normally impacted me after a particularly hairy incident, but never while in the cockpit.

imperfect flight following system, one never designed for successful air ground communications other than line of sight.

After the radio operator informed Vientiane of our successful landing, and secured the station for the night, our new friend offered to share what little he had and we added our emergency rations to his rice.

Following chow, we made our way to the Sikorsky Hotel for a semi-comfortable, but much needed rest following an extremely long, stressful, and traumatic day that included flying ten hours and twenty-five minutes. I drifted into a restless sleep, speculating about the screw-up and the implications it might have on my job. Despite the increased work, we realized that our jobs were still not secure, and, as always, depended on satisfactory performance. However, I took solace in the fact that I had employed Yankee ingenuity, a little talent, and had enjoyed incredible luck surviving what could have resulted in a far worse scenario. Still, like the Phu Kabo shooting incident the previous year with Alston, the episode provided an excellent learning experience which tended to influence many of my future actions.

Mulling over the flight from Mounng Cha, I was curious why Elmer had seemingly displayed so little concern for my welfare. Perhaps he did attempt to help, but I never heard a peep from him, and I never asked for an explanation. In my book, Marines never left other Marines hanging out on a limb. Had Munsell been a Marine imbued with Corps esprit, I believe assistance in some form would have been forthcoming.

MOUNG CHA

The following morning, after taking on a drum of fuel at Ban Na, I departed for Long Tieng and a work assignment. As the evacuation phase was winding down and the weather turning sour,

I flew less than half the flight time of the previous day. During one shuttle, I took Pop and Jiggs Weldon to Moung Cha and was instructed to shut down and wait. The stop gave me an opportunity to observe the full press humanitarian effort at close range. The camp appeared packed. Additional folks, not content to wait for transportation, constantly arrived at the "farm." Through an open panel of a large white parachute tepee, I could see the sloped perimeter lined with mostly sick and wounded women. Meo female nurses were busy ministering to refugees' various ailments. Apparently, there were not sufficient trained male medics, so, inundated by the influx of people requiring treatment, and in deference to the emergency, Vang Pao's bias against utilizing females for such work was waved. This marked another step forward in the normally inflexible Meo culture.

Doc indicated that some of the healthier individuals had walked from Moung Moc. They suffered mainly from foot blisters, dehydration, and exhaustion. I noted that the peoples' heavily callused feet, normally adequate for walking great distances, were severely torn and bloody.

For his part, looking important and spiffy in his military finery, Vang Pao pranced around the area like a proud peacock. I was totally absorbed in the semi-chaos around me, and attempted not to get in the way, while wondering where all the people would ultimately be located. Toward the end of the day, I returned Pop and Jiggs to Sam Tong.

Pop was obviously pleased. His spirits were buoyed by our outstanding efforts hauling so many refugees to safety. Totally out of character for the normally gruff old man, he was very gracious and introduced an attractive schoolteacher to me. An ethnic Lao, the lady had worked at the government-sponsored Lhat Houang (LS-09) school that IVS personnel had built on the edge

of the Plain of Jars in 1960. When the enemy rolled up the Plain of Jars at the end of that year, she was evacuated to a Lao village in the area that catered to those with varying stages of leprosy, with which she had been diagnosed.

While the two IVS workers, Blaine Jensen and Brian O'Connor, were busy erecting the Sam Tong school, Pop was having difficulty persuading trained Lao teachers to come and live at Site-20. Since Father "B" supplied medicine and ministered to leper villages, he knew the lady and had recruited her to teach at the Sam Tong elementary school. She was a good worker, conducting school during the day and at night training a few young Lao and Meo to become teachers.

After an introduction, in which we exchanged pleasantries in our individual languages, for some unknown reason (the man was unpredictable at times), Pop raised the right sleeve on her blouse to display a dark spot that he indicated was a minor form of leprosy. He went on to say that he and Padre Luke were protecting her while being treated, and she wore a long sleeved garment to effectively hide the distinctive blemish: a cause for possible banishment from the community where she had been so helpful. I always wondered what happened to her. ¹² ¹³

With reports of inhumane and depraved enemy treatment of tribal people rapidly circulating throughout the entire region, additional refugees streamed into Moung Moc. Therefore, on the 13th, we resumed Moung Cha shuttles in earnest. Sufficient fuel was now pre-positioned at Moung Moc, allowing me to choose when

¹² Years later when I inquired over the Internet with Doctor Weldon about the woman, "Jiggs" replied that someone had misdiagnosed the lady's condition. She did not have leprosy, but only an area of vitiligo on her arm, a skin depigmentation of unknown origin, and a completely benign condition.

¹³ Blaine Jensen Letter, 04/29/96.
Charles "Jiggs" Weldon Email, 01/30/97.

to add a barrel when necessary. During the day, my relief pilot anxiously waited to relieve me at The Alternate. With so much work yet to be accomplished, I was reluctant to leave, but that was the nature of our upcountry system. As I briefed the incoming Captain, I hoped he would exert a maximum effort to haul refugees.

While riding south on Bird PC-6 Porter, XW-PBQ, I reflected on the RON. Despite a night in the weeds, the five days had been extremely satisfying, as I had moved hundreds of refugees from the clutches of the enemy. Despite a Christian upbringing, I had never considered myself an overly altruistic person, but the recent refugee work afforded me some of the most enjoyable and mentally rewarding accomplishments I ever achieved helping people. There were many more future evacuations, but this one stuck in my memory.

For the first time while working upcountry, I ceased considering extra money as my primary goal. With the baby steps fully complete in the adjustment to working with mountain people, I initially failed to recognize that my transition in adapting to the Lao scene was nearing maturity and completion. During this RON period, I had integrated and entwined my level of consciousness into the operation, and for years thereafter, despite many trials and tribulations, I continued to love the work.

Pathet and North Vietnamese units continued their push to acquire as much territory as possible before the southwest monsoon drenched and largely shut down the region. Following successful offensives to clear real and potential threats along their lines of communications, the enemy poured additional assets onto the Plain of Jars. Before completing the operation, they occupied almost the entire PDJ, and approached Moung Soui's eastern periphery. The rapid roll-up of FAN and FAR forces in Military Region Two stunned Lao generals, the RLG, the Vientiane Embassy team, and the Washington administration. The defeat of his Neutralist military supporters severely eroded Souvanna Phouma's primary power base, and even prompted USG to consider activating the Seventh Fleet and reintroducing U.S. Marines to Thailand to help dampen the escalation.¹

The same day I returned to Thailand, the enemy moved onto the low ground bracketing Phou San and Phou Keng. Within days, their units moved down to blockade Route-7 and the south side of Phou Keng. This development effectively denied western FAN units communications between widely scattered units at Moung Phanh and Moung Kheung. As the situation rapidly spun downhill, the already tenuous loyalty of some Neutralist officers cracked; many revolted against Kong Le and defected to the Deuanist (Colonel Siphaseuth) camp.

One Neutralist, the commanding officer in charge of the 4th Paratroop Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Cheng Saignavong, discontented over the Rightist coup attempt, and the subsequent reorganization of the military, rebelled and made contact with

¹ Norman Hannah.

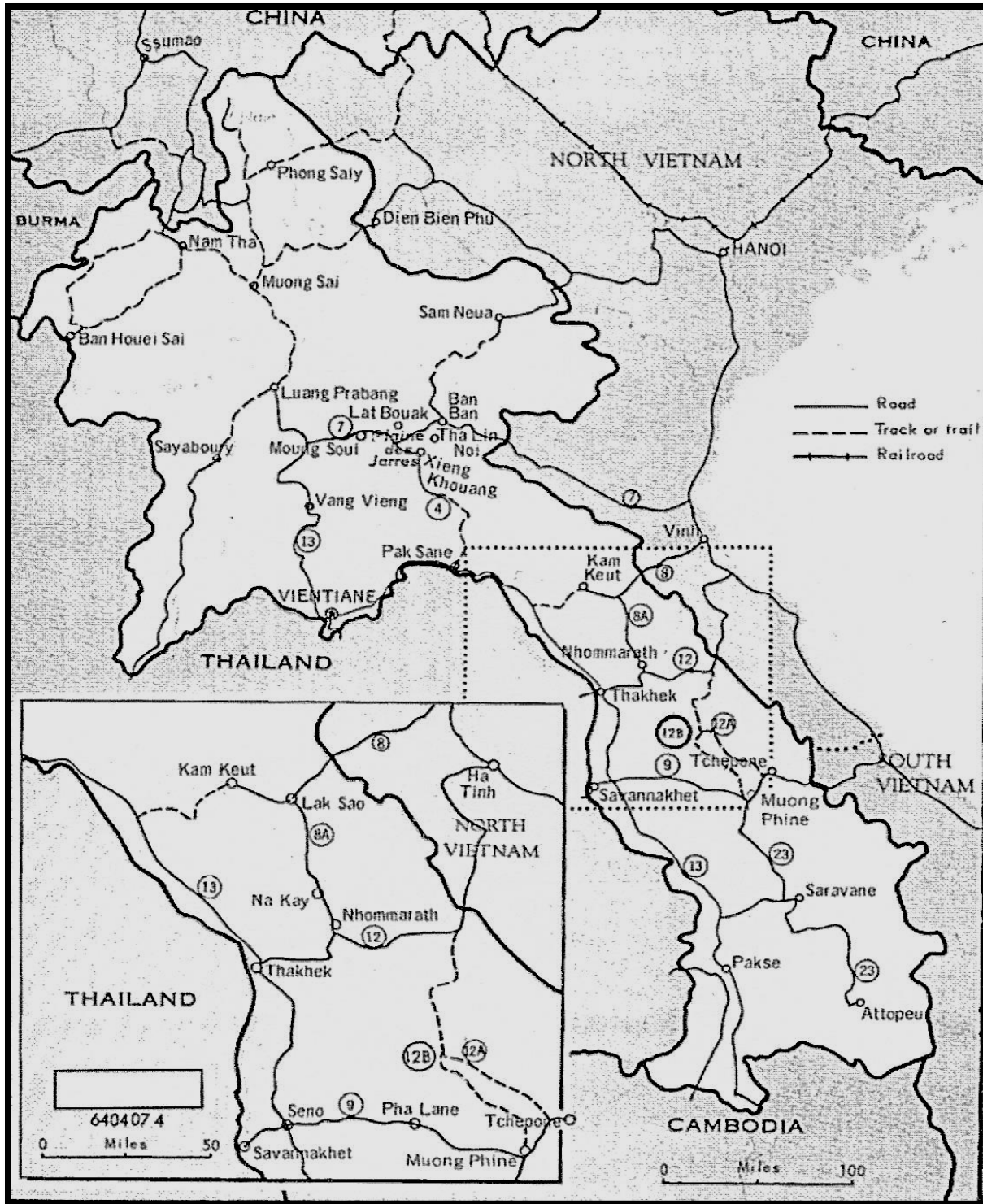
the Pathet Lao. He was the wrong person to alienate, for his men controlled parts of the Tha Thom Valley and high ground on the Plain of Jars. When Cheng and armor commander Lieutenant Colonel Soulideth Rattanakone threatened a coup against Kong Le, Souvanna Phouma agreed to their demands and attempted to convince them of his good intentions. ²

By the 14th, the combined forces of Pathet Lao, Patriotic Neutralists (turncoats), and Vietnamese stiffeners, numbering about 1,500 men, participated in a multi-battalion operation to clear Route-4 and threaten Paksane. They attacked vigorously, and within a short time dislodged two Neutralist GMs from Tha Thom (VS-11). According to General Kham Khong, Commanding Officer of Military Region Two, retreating government troops, with little or no actual fighting, rallied and re-grouped behind the mountain range south of the Tha Thom Valley on Route-4 at Sala Dene Dinh. Two days later, FAR units lost Tha Vieng (VS-13). Then the enemy moved toward the 3,600 foot Meo site at Phou Phai (VS-65) east of Padong. Ambassador Unger received word of Tha Tom's loss from the Prime Minister on the 15th, and proffered concerns about the enemy's ultimate objective. Souvanna raised the matter of supply shortages in Military Region Two impacting Tha Thom units, and those still remaining on the Plain of Jars.

Military Region Two was not the only troubled region. Unger also learned of an energetic Pathet Lao operation in Military Region Three in the Moung Phine and Route-23 area that captured Houay Mun, and threatened to sever Laos further south at Ban La Khone Pheng on Route-13 in Military Region Four. ³

² Ken Conboy, 108.
CIA Information Memorandum, 05/17/64.
Victor Anthony, 99.

³ Central Intelligence Bulletin, Daily Brief, 04/08/64. The enemy had moved 2,000-3,000 troops to the Moung Phine area during March.



Map of Laos showing major road/trail systems in Military Region Two and the southern provinces. Insert depicts the eastern infiltration routes at Nape (Route-8) and Mugia passes (Route-12).

CIA Bulletin, 04/08/64.

Late in the day, Ambassador Unger forwarded an optimistic, glass half full, telegram to State assessing the latest Military Region Two situation. It reflected the poor level of intelligence, wishful thinking, and hardheadedness displayed by the Embassy Country Team. The message reiterated the well-known fact that the enemy was engaged in seasonal efforts to obtain territory prior to the rainy season, in order to enhance military positions and secure supply lines. Unger postulated that the enemy's primary effort was at Tha Thom, with some action in the northern Plain of Jars, and toward Moung Soui. The center of the Plain of Jars was now threatened by Pathet Lao artillery, but after the government loss of Phou San, there were no immediate indications of further enemy movement in that area. Initial actions in the sector had been evident before the 19 April coup, indicating an effort to reclaim all areas occupied separately or jointly by them and the Neutralists during June 1962.

*"Should this indicate the present communist policy, the enemy would likely stop short of the Mekong. In the Tha Thom region, they might advance close to Borikhane [south of Tha Thom on Route-4]. While further advances might be made on the PDJ, along with efforts to sever the road between the Plaine and Moung Soui, **I would not anticipate attempts to eject the Neutralists from the PDJ.** However, the situation is changing, which may result in the communists pushing farther south, or even committed to taking all Laos."*⁴

During a discussion of impending action in Military Region Two, RLAFA commander, General Ma, informed head AIRA Representative, Colonel Tyrrell, that there would be a push against the Neutralists on the Plain. He also speculated that

⁴ Ambassador Unger message to State.

the Neutralists would not fight, but would join the enemy when pressed. However, when the air attaché forwarded this information to the U.S. Embassy, Unger promptly discounted it, saying there was no indication of an impending offensive. Within two days, the ensuing action revealed just how flawed Embassy intelligence and thinking was regarding communist intentions on the PDJ.

Despite Unger's muted optimism concerning enemy objectives in Laos, talks continued in Washington about dispatching American troops once again to Thailand. Alternate plans were in place to first deploy from forward Southeast Asia areas to strategic sites in Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. Phase Two would include introducing major forces from the Pacific region and CONUS.

Although the commonly agreed deployment of forces to Thailand would considerably shorten the reaction time to cross the border, realistically, the methodology had been used too often to be effective. Ambassador Martin believed that introducing American troops into Thailand as a show of force without a specific operation tailored to halt communist advances would be totally without merit. Also, there was the old issue with Thai sensitivity to foreign troops in their country. Therefore, as the enemy offensive gathered steam and the cogs of the slow Washington machinery bogged down even more, no consensus was reached regarding the subject. ⁵

⁵ Ken Conboy.

Leonard Unger-State, 05/15/64 (2).

CIA Information Cable, 05/17/64.

John Pratt, *CHECO, The Royal Lao Air Force*, 14.

U.S Foreign Relations (FRUS), 1964, Thailand, Memorandum Director Far East Region to the Deputy Assistant Secretary for International Security Affairs, 05/13/64, Letter to Mike Forrestal, NSC, 05/16/64.

THA THOM

An account drafted by International Voluntary Service Community Development Advisor George Dalley covering thirteen days in May, described the convoluted and confused situation in the Paksane region following the loss of the Tha Thom salient. During the night of May 16, an IVS interpreter arrived at Dalley's Muong Cao house in Borikhane Province with a report of fighting along Route-4 at Phou Tin Pet, a few miles south of the Tha Thom valley. As the village of Muong Cao was located forty kilometers south of Phou Tin Pet, there was considerable concern for individuals' safety, and people were already departing. Even the panicky Chao Muong wanted to leave if Dalley elected to drive his Jeep down to Paksane. Dalley had been informed about the situation around Tha Thom the day before by General Kham Khong. It was the first suggestion that the government position had actually fallen.

Subsequent reports indicated that the enemy had captured Muong Huong, another village on Route-4, ten kilos (six miles) south of Phou Tin Pet. After considering the rumors, but aware that FAR still maintained a number of troops between Muong Cao and Muong Huong, and that it was highly unlikely the enemy could move large units to Muong Huong in such a short time, Dalley rejected the reports as inaccurate.

On the 15th, FAR troops began arriving in Pakse onboard Air America planes from other regions of the country. Over a three-day period, several hundred men, along with an artillery piece, were channeled north of Muong Cao. Colonel Chansom, GM-13's commanding officer, informed Dalley that the enemy had indeed taken Muong Huong, and he was directing his men to make "contact." This was something he repeated over the next few days.

On 19 May, ICC representatives visited Paksane and Borikhane to investigate the reports and receive a briefing on fighting south and west of Tha Thom. Enemy advances ten kilometers from Borikhane had apparently been halted. However, fighting was in progress ten kilos south of the road between Tha Thom and Ban Tha Vieng.

An Army attaché (ARMA) assessment indicated that FAR was being intimidated by Vietnamese presence. Under threat from imminent enemy attack, the towns of Borikhane and Paksane could be provided a higher priority from U.S. sources. There were hopes that the enemy would not encroach south of Borikhane and disrupt the so-called "Red Line," a de facto demarcation line running the entire length of the country at the time of the Geneva Accords signing.

During ARMA visits to Paksane the following day, talks with Colonel Chanson and Colonel Singla, and in a Vientiane meeting with General Kham Khong and FAR generals, apparently there was no RLA contact established with the enemy, or further penetration south along Route-4. ⁶

By 20 May, life was returning to a quasi-normal state at Muong Cao. Four days later, Muong Huong was reoccupied by government forces. Reports of casualties were sketchy. When four companies of Chinese troops were reputed to have occupied Muong Huong, Dalley seriously questioned the report's validity. The visiting tasseng said a villager who spoke Vietnamese indicated he could not understand the troops. They also ate two dogs. As Lao never ate dogs, logically they must have been Chinese. Colonel Karbkeo later spouted this notion of the involvement of

⁶ ARMA Papers Prepared for the Vientiane Embassy, 05/21/64, 05/22/64.

Chinese troops stating "it was a typical communist tactic to send an advance party of either Vietnamese or Chinese to take a position, then replace them with Pathet Lao."

On 28 May, Dalley and two photographers began an investigation of the former front line at Ban Na Long. He judged that the area looked nothing like a front line. Then they Jeeped to Muong Huong to further assess the reports. Along the way, soldiers reported that there had been fighting on 20 May. They surmised that the much taller enemy were Chinese. Dalley was shown a Chinese-manufactured grenade and Soviet expended 7.52mm cartridge casings. A month old body wearing American supplied boots was produced.

There were two fresh graves on the outskirts of Muong Huong purported to be those of Chinese. After talking to the naiban concerning events in his village, Dalley believed that the villagers had never evacuated on 16 May when apprised by a FAR officer of the enemy approach. Because villagers never reported enemy movements to the FAR unit at Ban Na Long, he had serious doubts of their allegiance to the RLG. After substantiating that the enemy had purchased at least one dog to eat, he assumed that there were some Chinese or Viet Minh in the village. Lastly, from accumulated evidence delineated in Dalley's report, George concluded that the FAR never made contact with the enemy, preferring to wait until they withdrew from Muong Huong. Such inaction typified the nature of government troops during the Lao war. ⁷

⁷ George W. Dalley, CDA/Paksane to R.J. Bilinski, Area Coordinator/Paksane, *The Muong Huong Crisis*, 6/02/64. (After leaving Laos, Dalley opened a book store specializing in information about Laos, Vietnam, and Southeast Asia. Dalley kindly provided the report to the Author.)
Ambassador Leonard Unger to State, 05/20/64.

A CIA Information Memorandum relating to the Eastern camp's geopolitical reasoning, suggested that the Tha Thom offensive had constituted a test to ascertain Soviet leaders' reaction to current Pathet Lao activities in Laos. Any failure of the Soviets to react would appear to encourage enemy military action on the Plain of Jars.

Furthermore, Hanoi was concerned, for as Co-chairman of the Geneva Accords, the Soviets might be forced to initiate action to support Souvanna Phouma's Neutralists. The Chinese believed that their adversaries would attempt to retain Lao neutralization to thwart extension of Chicom influence over Lao and Southeast Asia. Finally, any attack against Vientiane would be shelved until additional information revealed Soviet reaction to Lao events.⁸

FURTHER LOSSES

While events in the Tha Thom area slowly unfolded, pressure on Kong Le's Plain of Jars headquarters increased to a boiling point. After leaving a major in charge at Moung Phanh, and taking some rolling stock, the self-proclaimed general relocated ten kilometers southwest to the western fringe of the Plain of Jars at Ban Khong. There was an excellent reason for choosing this location. Brigadier General Vang Pao had previously repositioned ADC troops in the hills overlooking the southern Plain, but his thin defenses were being compromised by Pathet Lao movement south and southwest. Therefore, he and his advisors wanted Neutralist forces to hold the Ban Khong line as a hard buffer to contain further enemy movement toward Sam Tong and Long Tieng. During previous talks, Vang Pao had persuaded Kong Le not to completely evacuate the Plain of Jars, promising that

⁸ CIA Information Memorandum, 05/18/64.

he could move his troops west into the hills if necessary to escape the enemy, and help bolster Meo positions. Since there was no love lost between the two men or their armies, Vang Pao's encouragement and offers to help were not entirely altruistic. Past experience with the FAN had revealed a tendency for Neutralist soldiers to run or defect when pressured. Therefore, the latest strategy appeared to be the best of the worst options. Meo representatives continued to meet with Neutralist commanders to encourage confidence in Kong Le's ability to hold at the edge of the Plain of Jars. As a perk to lessen pressure on Kong Le, Vang Pao intended to dispatch a representative to Vientiane to persuade the General Staff to release the three T-28s stationed at Wattay Airport for strike missions.

As expected, at 0600 hours on 17 May, enemy units moved to occupy Ban Ban and Phou Naut around Moung Phanh, and strike at FAN headquarters. ARMA's Colonel Law and a CIA observer were flown to Moung Phanh in the morning to assess the situation. Complete confusion ruled, as Kong Le had already departed the area. The Americans were forced to leave when heavy 80mm mortar fire impacted the area. By 1030 hours, the embassy cabled Washington that the situation was very grave, with FAN headquarters expected to fall. When shells began to drop on the ICC team site, Unger requested an immediate evacuation of the ICC personnel and French advisory teams. During the movement, the teams were obligated to leave all their supplies behind when they were evacuated by two ICC helicopter crews.

Enemy action was not focused exclusively on lower Military Region Two. In Sam Neua Province, Pathet Lao units captured a historic Meo-FAR site from Colonel Tong's mixed BV units on the Sam Neua road at Moung Peun (Lima-31). Located about fourteen nautical miles east and north of the FAR administration center at Houa Moung (VS-58), Ban Houa Xieng, Ban Nam Pao and other

unmarked government sites in close proximity to L-31 also fell. Only Houay Sai Lao, three miles north, survived an attack. ⁹

COOK'S CAPER

About the same time as the attacks north of Houa Moung began, Captain Bill Cook flew Case Officer Terry Burke from Long Tieng to the site. They were loaded with ammunition for an outpost close to the recent action, where troops were in contact (TIC) around Moung Peun. The position lay on the south knoll of a narrow ridge. It was separated by a deep, narrow ravine from a Pathet Lao-held ridge a few hundred yards to the northeast. As they neared the site, Terry climbed down from the cockpit into the cargo compartment. Intending to talk Bill into the position and avoid enemy fire, he relieved the Filipino crew chief of his helmet and seat by the door. Burke's BAR rifle was held at the ready to suppress any ground fire. They landed in defilade without incident, to the west just below the ridgeline.

Terry quickly exited, while Meo soldiers unloaded the ship and carried a wounded man to the helicopter for evacuation. Burke found the PARU noncommissioned officer assigned to the unit. As small arms fire sailed over the ridge, the two yelled at each other, while attempting to converse above the chugging engine and whirling blades. The Thai quickly debriefed Burke both orally and by map tracings. Satisfied with the situation report, Burke then passed Vang Pao's instructions.

With the PARU's information in hand, Burke and one other soldier reentered the H-34, keyed the ICS button in the cabin,

⁹ Segment Sources:

Leonard Unger-State, 05/17/64, 1115L.
Bill Leary 1964 Notes, UTD.
Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 108, 113.
CIA Information Cable, 05/17/64.
Leonard Unger-State, 06/04/64.

and advised Cook to leave and depart to the west. He repeated the warning not to pass over the ridge, or fly north or east between the two positions during takeoff. However, Bill Cook was a stubborn individual, who always wanted to take charge and do things his way. He said OK, but, without heeding Burke's advice, cleared the ridgeline in a cloud of dust, banked north and then turned east around the knoll toward the enemy position. Probably smacking their lips over such a lucrative target, Pathet Lao gunners opened fire, while Burke countered with a burst of automatic BAR fire. Passing the end of the ridge, they were hit. Burke heard rounds splatter and reverberate against the H-34s fuselage, and he observed streams of daylight through holes. Then he looked above his head, as a braided cable that ran the length of the cabin section exploded and split.

At that moment, the engine screamed in a high-pitched whine and the aircraft began spinning. Cook autorotated and began conducting tight turns, while the ship dropped into the ravine between the opposing forces. Then he radioed a Mayday-Mayday in the blind that his ship was hit and going down near Site-X. Burke saw the walls of the steep ravine flash by the door. Then the panicked Cook repeatedly radioed, *"Tell my wife and kids goodbye, as we are going to die."*

Terry recognized that his pilot was acting irrationally. Intending to shock him back into concentrating on the forced landing, he shouted over ICS *"Shut up and fly, Bill, and let your death be a surprise!"* His invective achieved its purpose and Burke felt the nose of the aircraft pitch up, as Cook terminated in a remarkably executed three-point landing at the bottom of the narrow valley.

Once the rotors stopped turning, Burke and the crew chief removed the wounded man. With heavy fire emanating from both ridges, it was difficult at first to tell which side was

friendly. Then, after observing muzzle flashes, he determined that the enemy was firing down at them, while the Meo directed their fire across the ravine at the Pathet Lao position. After departing the cockpit, Cook began issuing orders to follow him, and began moving up the wrong side of the ravine toward the enemy. Burke curtly shouted at Bill that in the air he was in charge, but on the ground **he** was the boss. Bill then calmed. Burke snapped a picture of the downed ship for posterity, and between the unwounded soldier, the crew chief, Cook, and the Case Officer, they helped the wounded in action (WIA) up the incline. Jutting outcrops helped provide cover until the group was joined by PARU types and several Meo soldiers who assisted them to safety. Within several hours, another H-34 arrived to ferry everyone out of the site. This time the pilot, heeding instructions, departed in the correct direction, and avoided ground fire.

A few days later, after the enemy retreated, the H-34 was repaired and flown out of the ravine.

Burke then went to Hong Non to spend a few days with Colonel Tong who had relocated there following the loss of Moung Peun. According to local intelligence gatherers, Site-86 was projected to be a future enemy target. Therefore, Burke, Tong, and the assigned PARU planned ambushes and harassing tactics along enemy supply lines to set back the enemy timetable.¹⁰

AIR POWER

Until the May attack against FAN forces, General Ma's tiny RLAF possessed only four of six operational T-28s and a few non-

¹⁰ Former Case Officer Terry Burke Emails, 02/21/04, 09/09/06, 09/10/06.
Terry Burke's *Early Days* Manuscript.

tactical aircraft. As offensive machines, the planes were generally restricted to dispensing rockets and gunfire. All that changed when, Souvanna Phouma by late morning, learned of the Neutralist retreat, and, at Unger's urging, agreed that T-28 pilots could bomb appropriate targets. The ambassador posed the long envisioned scenario of using Udorn-based Waterpump American pilots for immediate T-28 strikes. He indicated that the machines could easily be configured with Lao insignia logos to mask American involvement. After telling Colonel Tyrrell to alert the Air Commandos of impending combat, "Barney" Cochran began sanitizing his four ships and pilots for possible action. In a telegram to State, Unger requested authority to introduce more effective 500-pound bombs from Peppergrinder stocks located south of Udorn in friendly Thailand. He lobbied to employ them promptly, using the Udorn-based T-28s. By late afternoon, the ambassador received permission to forward the larger bombs and fuses to Wattay Airport for storage at a special holding facility. However, using USAF pilots in a combat role was tabled as not being politically feasible. Instead, a decision was proposed to use Udorn-based T-28 Thai pilots. A base for offensive operations was dependent on fruitful talks between Prime Minister Thanom and Ambassador Martin. ¹¹

Deep in the bowels of Washington think tanks, intelligence officers concluded that the recent communist movement sought to regain the entire Plain of Jars, and that a continued offense would entirely eliminate the Neutralist presence. Furthermore, capture of the Plain of Jars and Lao army positions around Tha Thom would enable the enemy to control much of Laos, except for

¹¹ Telegram Unger-State-State-Unger, 05/17/64, 1200L, 1652L.
Bundy Paper, 05/23/64.
Victor Anthony, 100.

the more populated lowland territory leading to and including the Mekong Valley. However, current views envisioned no further advances toward the Mekong River towns. ¹²

Challenged to take action, Unger elected to allow General Ma's Lao pilots to fly the four Waterpump T-28s. Because of the restrictions prohibiting bombs from being loaded on T-28s at the Udorn Air Force Base, an Air America C-47 prepositioned the ordnance to Wattay Airport. To load the weapons, five Air Force specialists dressed in civvies were sent to the airport.

A final memorandum from State that night instructed Ambassador Unger to suggest that the Prime Minister request the U.S. military to conduct a small number of low-level jet reconnaissance missions over Route-4 from Tha Thom south to Paksane and other important areas on the Plain of Jars, in order to gather critical intelligence and targeting information.

Hoping to preserve his FAN power base, Souvanna Phouma authorized the overt low-level reconnaissance missions. This decision marked a major escalation in support for Kong Le. Furthermore, the air missions completely changed the balance of power in the country and, in turn, the entire complexion of the war. From a helicopter pilot's viewpoint, future developments would radically transform our daily missions, adding further excitement and danger in the form of SAR standby and actual rescue missions.

Reiterating his concern, Secretary Rusk continued to advise Unger that it currently seemed an unwarranted risk to use easily identifiable "round eye" American pilots to fly the four T-28s Detachment-6 was loaning to the RLAF the following day. Pending Royal Thai Government approval, using experienced Thai T-28

¹² U.S. Intelligence Board, 05/17/64, 1630L.

pilots, who looked exactly like Lao, to fly combat missions would be far more sensible. ¹³

On Monday the 18th, General Ma and three qualified pilots arrived in Udorn to receive the planes. That same afternoon, once released for Plain of Jars missions, General Ma's tiny force of exclusively Lao-piloted T-28s enthusiastically pounded enemy positions at Phu Keng. Although only constituting a pinprick in the overall situation, their sky borne artillery instilled confidence in Neutralist troops clinging to the pierced steel planking (PSP) airfield (V-22) at Xieng Khouang on the central Plain of Jars, and at Ban Ang, an abandoned village a few miles to the south. At the end of the day, with several thousand troops and a substantial amount of equipment assembled, Kong Le continued to hold Ban Khong. ¹⁴

AMERICAN AIR RECONNAISSANCE RESUMES

When the communists attacked FAN troops on the Plain of Jars, there had been little or no aerial intelligence available since the Geneva Accords signing in 1962. Therefore, Washington planners decided to take measures to instill confidence in the Neutralist Army and present tangible evidence that the U.S. was committed to supporting Souvanna Phouma's government. First steps were tailored to resume low-level aerial reconnaissance missions, which would hopefully provide evidence that the Viet Minh and Chinese were supplying and pulling strings for their

¹³ Telegram State to Lao Embassy, 05/17/64, 1822L.

¹⁴ Leonard Unger.
Victor Anthony, 101.

¹⁵ Such action would constitute the first reconnaissance in Laos since operation Field Goal, flown with a RT-33 in the spring and fall of 1961; Mill Pond with Agency RB-26s in the late spring of 1961; USAF RF-101Cs Pipe Stem in the fall of 1961; and RF-101s Able Mable until November 1962.

Pathet Lao puppets. ¹⁵ Supporting photographic evidence of a flagrant Geneva Accord breach could then be funneled to International Control Commission (ICC) personnel and then disseminated to the press for worldwide consumption.

Following an eighteen month drought without tactical low or medium level Able Mable reconnaissance flights over Laos, and mostly guessing the strength and disposition of enemy resources, the Joint Chiefs of Staff pushed Washington officials to obtain Souvanna Phouma's authorization to implement renewed aerial reconnaissance to better assess the situation. Anticipating a green light for these operations, they told CINCPAC to alert USAF RF-101C pilots at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, South Vietnam, and U.S. Navy RF-8A Crusader and RA-3B Sky Warrior carrier crews in the Tonkin Gulf to standby for action. Backing up these forces were F-100 Super Saber jets, located at Clark Air Force Base, Philippines, and Takhli, Thailand.

The reconnaissance phase alert kicked into high gear on 18 May. CINCPAC dispatched orders to Carrier Task Group (CTG) 77.8 squadron commanders in the South China Sea, and USAF air operations honchos based at Tan Son Nhut, to prepare to initiate a show of force, and conduct reconnaissance missions over Laos. Forming the core of the CTG, the USS *Kitty Hawk* was escorted by four destroyers.

Authorization to conduct missions was immediately forthcoming. While U.S. Navy planes handled the Paksane and Plain of Jars area, USAF RF-101C Voodoo aircraft were charged with photographing enemy infiltration routes through eastern Military Region Three. Envisioning a contained operation at first, MACV proposed two daylight and one night mission each week. However, sorties were contingent on good photographic

results, and the only restriction was to avoid North Vietnam over flights. Recommendations proposed that air strikes against any uncovered lucrative targets be conducted by unmarked Vietnamese Air Force or RLAF T-28s. ¹⁶

MILITARY ACTIVITY

With little in the way to discourage their movement, enemy troops continued their offensive on the 18th. After rolling up Phou Keng, as the enemy moved toward Ban Khong it appeared that the remaining Neutralist defenses would easily succumb under pressure. General Ma's pilots, flying twelve sorties, entered the fray dropping one hundred and 500-pound bombs on selected enemy positions. One mission was designed to destroy Kong Le's abandoned headquarters, and the huge ammunition dump at Moung Phanh.

At last light, the armored unit still at Moung Phanh attempted to move along Route-7 to Moung Soui and join FAN stragglers regrouping there with dire results. Further north at Moung Kheung, although resisting enemy onslaughts, FAN tanks, over the course of several days expended all their ammunition without receiving further re-supply, and were rendered offensively useless. Ten tanks arrived largely intact at Moung Soui, but many armored cars and AAA guns were abandoned. By evening, reports indicated that Kong Le's troops, backed by Meo

¹⁶ Segment Sources:
Berger, USAF in Southeast Asia.
CHECO SEA Report, Evolution of the Rules of Engagement for Southeast Asia, 1960-65.
Edward Marolda, Fitzgerald 378-79.
William Greenhalgh, *Voodoo*, 53-54.
Ken Conboy, 114.
Victor Anthony, 101.

defenses, were making progress in organizing positions on the southern rim of the Plain of Jars.

It appeared that the enemy plan to capture all of Laos was proceeding on schedule. Current military action pointed to isolating Vientiane Province and severing the country between Savannakhet and Pakse in the south. In Military Region Two, three mixed Pathet Lao battalions were proceeding toward Luang Prabang; two battalions were moving against Vang Vieng; and one battalion was on the march toward Paksane. If the unit on Route-4 continued unimpeded, after capturing Paksane and Route-13, Vientiane would be effectively denied land access to southern Laos. The Pathet Lao would then commence the next phase of their operation: the capture of southern Attapeu and Saravane Provinces in Military Region Four. The Pathet Lao were actively engaged in fighting for Houay Mun in Military Region Three, eighty kilos southwest of Moung Phine. Movement further south on Route-13 to capture Souvanna Khili, a town equidistant between Pakse and Khone Sedone, would effectively sever the Savannakhet line of communication from Pakse.

Once objectives at Luang Prabang, Vang Vieng, and Pakse were achieved, the enemy could then move on the administrative capital. Pathet Lao leaders believed that once Luang Prabang fell, chances of government troops at Vientiane defecting were excellent. Enemy agents were already attempting to persuade some government troops in the capital to desert in order to help turn the city over without much bloodshed. ¹⁷

Early morning on the 19th, enemy units attacked FAN positions on the southern rim of the Plain of Jars, sending Kong

¹⁷ Leonard Unger, 05/18/64.
Ken Conboy, 108.
CIA Intelligence Information, 05/18/64.

Le's forces reeling and scurrying into the hills to rally at the Meo-controlled site at Ban Na. At the time, with Kong Le holding his left flank, Vang Pao's Meo had been making good progress against the enemy. However, when Neutralist soldiers abruptly departed the Plain of Jars without consulting him, Vang Pao's troops were exposed, and he was obligated to beat a hasty retreat. Very upset, Vang Pao stopped at Sam Tong on his way to Ban Na for a confrontation with Kong Le. He indicated to Americans present that he would likely shoot the little general. Two hours later, the general returned to Sam Tong. Obviously, Kong Le had managed to charm Vang Pao, for now, concerned about the general's health, the Meo leader informed Doctor Weldon that Kong Le was sick, and asked the doctor to return with him to Ban Na to evaluate and treat the man. After arriving in a Helio Courier, Jiggs found Kong Le only suffering from a stuffy nose and sinusitis. After prescribing a decongestant and an antibiotic, he left, scratching his head over the strange war.¹⁸

With the Plain of Jars almost completely controlled by the enemy, Americans filtered into and out of Ban Na trying to assess and make sense out of the confusing situation. Kong Le indicated that the situation on the Plain had been very serious since 18 May. He rationalized his men's retreat, saying that when fighting reached a crescendo, his men could no longer resist the superior force. Without producing tangible proof, he stated the shop-worn cliché, the enemy were not Lao Pathet Lao, but mostly Chinese and Vietnamese communists, and that the extra-territorial enemy wanted to disrupt Lao neutrality and violate the Geneva Accords. After his confident behavior, the Americans were optimistic that the highly emotional Kong Le and his men would continue to fight to hold their present position.

¹⁸ Jiggs Weldon Email, 01/23/97.

When not disturbed by embassy fact finders, Vang Pao and Kong Le spent the day hashing over near term strategy. With 500 troops already situated at Ban Na, and a command post and one battalion situated between that site and Ban Khong, Kong Le planned to reorganize his men and operate from Site-15. He also planned to have Air America aircraft crews shuttle several thousand refugees to Sam Tong and then to Vientiane. The generals recognized that the Neutralist battalions west of the Plain of Jars rallying around Moung Soui had to maintain complete coordination with Vang Pao to be effective in countering enemy movements. Before parting, Kong Le asked Vang Pao to attempt to arrange a visit by Souvanna Phouma to Ban Na.

As Kong Le's forces departed the PDJ, General Ma's growing T-28 force working out of Wattay Airport, supported by American military technicians, continued reconnaissance, targeting and air strikes against enemy concentrations. A buildup of materiel and troops was noted around Phu Ba and Phou Keng that was sure to advance toward Moung Soui. As the Pathet Lao marched westward, supporting AAA units followed. A hard position was sighted at Moung Phanh, making reconnaissance more hazardous for the slow moving T-28s. The light delaying action by FAN units withdrawing toward Moung Soui, coupled with an airstrike on a Route-7 bridge across the Nam Ngum, was in the planning stage. After Kong Le's troops vacated the area, claiming near hits, three planes reportedly attacked sixty vehicles west of Ban Khong.

Well to the east, at Vang Pao's urging to relieve increased pressure at newly fortified Khang Kho and Pha Phai (VS-65), four T-28 pilots struck a troop column moving on Route-4 between Ban Pha and Nam Pot toward Ban Tha Vieng (VS-13). Using 500 pound bombs and .50 caliber machine gun fire (called Fifty Mike Mike in the trade), pilots reported encountering small arms fire, but

claimed that Ban Pha was destroyed. There were unsubstantiated rumors that Barney Cochran, Commanding Officer of the Waterpump Detachment, had participated in the first missions.

At the end of the day, Ambassador Unger noted that the seven operational T-28s were sufficient to accommodate an existing RLAf pilot pool. However, since only a handful of T-28s were available, more strike aircraft were required ASAP, particularly if fighting continued at the present level. Ten additional planes, supplemented with American pilots, could be used to plug the gaps.

That night, Under Secretary of State George Ball called McGeorge Bundy, Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, soliciting his advice and general reaction about using civilian American pilots to fly T-28s in Laos. Citing Unger's thoughts on the subject, Bundy replied that using civilians as fighter pilots in Laos would be unpopular, as the non-military flying by Air America had first been, and was still under constant propaganda attacks from the Eastern Bloc. Bundy then said that he would check with his CIA sources to find out if there were sufficient pilots in Thailand qualified to accomplish such a job. ¹⁹

The following day, with MAP-issued A1Es slated to replace South Vietnamese T-28s, CINCPAC directed COMUSMACV to transfer five surplus T-28s, and five RT reconnaissance planes from the South Vietnamese Air Force inventory to the RLAf through Waterpump. Four aircraft would be retained in Udorn to continue pilot training and replace the ones recently transferred to the

¹⁹ Segment Sources:

Leonard Unger-Translation from Kong Le, 05/19/64.

Leonard Unger-State, 05/19/64.

Project CHECO.

Memorandum of Phone Conversation between George Ball and McGeorge Bundy, 05/19/64, 0940L.

RLAF. By late June, further augmentations provided thirty three T-28s.

At the same time, Unger continued his quest to gain Washington's approval to utilize civilian pilots to fly T-28s for specific road cutting operations. To stem advancing enemy forces on the Plain of Jars, the requirement was deemed urgent. Souvanna, recognizing the need, approved the radical measure. The ambassador indicated that seven Air America and four Bird and Son Vientiane-based pilots with previous T-28 experience were immediately available for recurrent and proficiency training in Udorn. Most were former Marines, who were believed to possess more talent and were more subject to proper discipline and guidance than their Lao counterparts. As a viable cover story, plans were in the mill for the RLG to issue legal documents to the pilots and change their personnel records to reflect termination of employment with Air America. The pilots would then have official status as civilian technicians individually hired by the RLG.

During a daily White House staff meeting, McGeorge Bundy indicated that he was about to ask the President's approval for intensified reconnaissance and to use some American civilian pilots to fly T-28s in Laos. He also asked State and Defense representatives about sending troops to Thailand.

After delay, that evening Secretary Rusk granted Unger the authority to use American pilots for the indicated T-28 missions.²⁰

During Unger's discussion with Souvanna Phouma, the concerned Prime Minister stated that U.S. forces might be required to persuade the communists that the RLG and USG were

²⁰ Leonard Unger, 05/20/64.
State, 05/20/64, 1700L.
John Pratt, *Project CHECO*, 18.

serious about Lao neutrality. Except for a restriction regarding no foreign combat activity, he withdrew all objections or reservations relating to USAF low-level or recce flights over the Plain of Jars and Paksane areas. He requested that the sorties be placed on hold until the T-28s were in place to strike likely targets. Expecting probing questions from the media concerning the flights, he suggested that the flights could be explained as coordination with the RLG to supplement information about enemy dispositions and intentions. Always a realist in protecting his fragile Neutralist government, he recognized that such flights could lead to an escalation of fighting. ²¹

With the withdrawal of a majority of FAN troops from the Plain of Jars, and Meo assets along LOCs, low-level aerial reconnaissance generally became the only means of obtaining current intelligence outlining enemy dispositions and movement. Therefore, on the 19th, noting Ambassador Unger and Souvanna Phouma's concern over the current situation, the Joint Chiefs of Staff cleared the way to conduct immediate low-level reconnaissance missions in Military Region Three. With Southeast Asian assets available, additional flights could be conducted in the Plain of Jars area, along the DMZ, and along the Lao-Vietnamese-PDJ borders.

Targets in Military Region Two would be surveyed along the western stretch of Route-7 from the towns of Nong Het, Ban Ban, Khang Khay, and the Plain of Jars, as well as along Route-4 southeast of the Plain, from the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley to Ban Tha Vieng, Tha Thom, and Borikhane. In the north, they would survey Route-6 from Moung Peun, and Moung Khao to Sam Neua town.

²¹ Leonard Unger, 05/20/64.

In Military Region One, Moung Sing and the Nam Tha border areas would be surveyed, while in Military Region Three, Route-12 and a corridor from the Thai border eastward to the border along Route-9 would include the Tchepone logistic hub.

In order to show the flag, flights would be conducted over Pathet Lao positions and troop concentrations at altitudes that would ensure that the planes were actually sighted and identified as U.S. planes. It was doubtful that the reconnaissance flights could currently aid Kong Le's forces, but they would certainly demonstrate to all parties USG's determination to actively support the RLG.

Primed and ready, that same day four RF 101Cs departed Tan Son Nhut, South Vietnam. Streaking over the Lao Panhandle, they snapped the first low-level photographs of the region since December 1962. Because of a lack of major distinguishable roads and landmarks in the southern area, initial missions produced little significant intelligence.²²

Subsequent embassy analysis of enemy battle plans revealed a startlingly simple approach to their patient actions over a three-month period. Capturing Phu Khe in February, Phu San in April, and Phu Thueng in May, afforded the commies adequate domination of the high ground, observation of Neutralist positions on the Plain of Jars, and the opportunity for a successful double envelopment.

When challenged by RLG leaders, Pathet Lao representatives denied any participation in the Plain of Jars offensive, an unconvincing claim because of their mountain conquests. The political arm of the movement, the Neo Lao Hak Sat, asserted that the entire operation was effected by defecting Neutralists. Knowing better, FAN leaders in Vientiane and field generals

²² Greenhalgh, Voodoo, 53-54.

disputed this declaration. However, since the ICC no longer had a team in place or could assess conditions on the Plain of Jars, they could not investigate the areas of fighting, troop movements, or charges.²³

²³ Leonard Unger-State Department, 06/04/64.

During May 1964, the U.S. air war in Laos commenced in earnest. USG had been requested to provide a show of support for the Royal Lao Government. At the time, no over flights of North Vietnam had been conducted, and the air war in the south was still in its infancy. This RLG request for help provided the catalyst which led to the most intensive air war ever conducted by the U.S. military.

The USS *Kitty Hawk* carrier deployed to the Far East in September 1963. In April, the ship, slated to be rotated back to CONUS, was sailing in the waters near Okinawa when orders arrived to proceed to a geographic point at the entrance of the Tonkin Gulf, one hundred miles east of Danang off the South Vietnamese coast. This location became generically known as Yankee Station.

According to U.S. Navy Lieutenant Charles Klusmann, a principal involved in the action, while enroute to Yankee Station pilots and air operations officers discussed how to best generate air support for the land locked country of Laos. Options ranged from an entire air group flyover (humorously called a group grope), to utilizing six to eight planes of different types to merely show the flag. Another alternative, ultimately selected, more realistically utilized only two unarmed Ling-Temco-Vought RF-8A Crusader photo reconnaissance planes to conduct intelligence gathering missions.

Other than being aware of Air Force and Marine assets operating at various South Vietnamese locations, there was little coordination or tangible information regarding initial missions between planners at the operating level. Pilots were briefed on approximately where the good and bad guys were located, but were furnished few other details. Interestingly,

there was already an organization called Air America operating aircraft in Laos delivering food and supplies to friendly civilian and military forces. The number of helicopters available in the country, or whether they could be relied on for SAR duty at any time, was unknown. The military pilots were erroneously informed that Air America aircraft had only VHF radio capability, hence a U.S. Navy plane equipped with VHF would have to be employed to communicate with Air America.¹ Because of this radio limitation, shipboard SAR plans were necessarily inadequate. If a plane was shot down, the carrier would launch its own helicopters toward the downed area, but it might take two days to arrive in a target area if the site was located in northern Laos.

All the flight crews had attended survival school and other escape and evasion training against the possibility that they were shot down. If captured, the Code of Conduct, issued after the Korean War, was very specific. It restricted a prisoner of war (POW) from divulging any information except his name, rank, and serial number. However, a 7th Air Force briefing took a conflicting approach to survival if captured: A pilot was encouraged to play dumb, saying that he believed he was flying over Thailand or Vietnam. According to CINCPAC regulations, the reconnaissance pilot, if downed over questionable territory, was to say it was all a big mistake, and request that his captors notify the American Embassy. To make this an official and formal requirement for the record, Lieutenant Klusmann had to read, acknowledge, and sign a standard form.

With Kong Le forces on the ropes and Pathet Lao troops reported west of Mounng Soui, close to the Sala Phu Khoun junction, timely intelligence was deemed critical for FAN

¹ The Air America military bailed UD-34Ds actually were UHF radio equipped.

survival. Should the last bastions of government control fall, so would the Neutralist political party. Therefore, on the morning of 21 May, aircraft carrier personnel launched two RF-8A Crusaders from Light Photographic Squadron (VPF) 63. Chuck Klusmann flew wingman for Lieutenant Commander Ben Cloud, with a mission to photograph portions of the PDJ and its Route-7 main artery leading from North Vietnam. With no in-flight refueling planned, the distance was 500 miles from the carrier to the target area, which allowed an estimated twenty minutes on station.

The flight plan directed them east over the Tchepone crossroads, then, to avoid overflying Thailand, a right turn to overhead Paksane. Using the river town as an initial point (IP), they then turned north, descending rapidly toward the spacious Plain of Jars. Arriving in the target area at 1130 hours, they flew at the stipulated altitude of 3,500 feet and 350 knots.² This left them thirty minutes to bingo.

The pilots were not briefed on current AAA positions, but they never expected anyone to actually shoot at them during the missions. Moreover, the Crusader was a very reliable aircraft. With a youthful invincible spirit bolstering them, the pilots were cavalier in their attitude toward the Lao overflight, and felt secure in their cockpits and sixteenth of an inch aluminum fuselage. At this time, Chuck Klusmann's image of being shot at in combat stemmed from World War Two and Korean War movies depicting copious flack represented by large black airbursts.

Despite the plane's advanced capability and the pilots' bravado, the enemy was not cowed. They were prepared and waiting

² Because of a lack of substantive photographic evidence regarding Vietnamese activity, subsequent flights were conducted at 500-foot and 550-600 knots during daylight missions.

for incursions into their territory. Not well understood by U.S. military tacticians at this time, enemy AAA gunners did not have to accurately track a jet. All required was to form a straight line of guns between the aircraft's anticipated roll in point and its target. Then, when a plane was caught in this funnel, gunners would saturate the sky with shells. The constricted gauntlet along Route-7 through the mountains from Nong Het and Ban Ban to the Plain of Jars proved well suited to employ this deadly technique.

At first, the mission proceeded without incident. The two pilots flew over the Plain of Jars separately to increase photo coverage, but maintained visual contact with each other. At one point, Cloud radioed that he thought they were taking ground fire as he looked around and observed white puffs in the vicinity of the aircraft and red streaks emanating from the ground. Then, probably hit by 23mm shells, several warning lights illuminated in the cockpit, and Chuck noticed fuel pouring from the left wing. Cloud advised him to turn to avoid further AAA when the fire began to track his tail. After several maneuvers to clear the intense AAA, the wing caught fire. Hoping the flames would extinguish, the two pilots climbed above 40,000-feet and headed for the barn. After twenty anxious minutes watching pieces of the wing separate and fly off, the fire extinguished. Despite this encouraging development, his plane had lost considerable fuel, which created tension and doubts about Klusmann's ability to make the Kittyhawk.

With the weather CAVU (ceiling and visibility unlimited) in the vicinity of Tchepone, Chuck noticed contrails from the west. Unaware of USAF reconnaissance missions in that area, and concerned about enemy jets attacking the flight, he called the ship to request fighter backup.

After spotting the ship, Chuck noted that he had only enough fuel for one go around. Not wanting to chance a bolter (abort), he manually lowered the landing gear, checked his wing flexibility, and began a long, straight in, low power glide descent to final. Once safely on the deck, he observed that the left wing was a mass of melted aluminum and the top of the left aileron was burned away. The Crusader had numerous holes that required an eighteen-month overhaul. However, despite the damage, the sturdy aircraft had brought him home safely.

After the incident, Kittyhawk flight crews lobbied for armed reconnaissance flights. Armed escort was denied. Daytime flights continued, using the same routes in and out of Laos, but at lower altitudes and greater air speed. Flying was more difficult, but the planes received less battle damage. For a short time there was no coordination with other services, or satisfactory SAR plans.

Yankee Team missions were tailored to satisfy U.S. Embassy AIRA and ARMA requests for photos of enemy supply depots, bivouac sites, transportation convoys, and likely interdiction points throughout the country for possible T-28 strikes.

The high-resolution cameras provided excellent pictures. On succeeding flights, Chuck Klusmann obtained photos of men jumping into foxholes. He flew one night reconnaissance at 10,000 feet and found the light show spectacular, with massive gunfire exploding beneath him. An estimated fifty percent of U.S. Navy reconnaissance planes received ground fire. Continuing flights soon revealed numerous 37mm and 57mm guns in and around the Plain of Jars. Some of them were radar equipped, and smaller caliber 12.7mm and 14.5mm guns supplemented the larger weapons.

Another time, he snapped a photo of a large fixed wing aircraft at Long Tieng. ³

Despite recent aircraft and crew encounters with anti-aircraft artillery on the Plain of Jars, in a discussion of Lao reconnaissance missions with CINCPAC on the 25th, the Joint Chief of Staff authorized a continuous program of missions. CINCPAC could now proceed and plan future missions instead of those scheduled only one day at a time. Night missions and those using infrared photography were sanctioned. The message reiterated that any overflight of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DVR) was not authorized.

CINCPAC replied that the Yankee Team program had to be responsive to requirements and multi-layers of the Lao U.S. Embassy Country Team, COMUSMACV, CINCPAC, the JCS, and higher authority (ergo, the President). Thai air bases were not to be used under any circumstances, and, in a bind, coordination between the operating force was to be effected locally.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff specified, and COMUSMACV designated, Commanding Officer of the Second Air Division Major General Joseph Moore coordinator between the U.S. Air Force and Navy. When given the green light, General Moore established a Yankee Team command post at his Saigon headquarters. Moore was given authorization to suggest, but not compel, Naval actions. Therefore, hoping to conduct a smooth operation, he dispatched an Air Force liaison officer to the Kitty Hawk, and in turn, five U.S. Navy personnel were sent to Moore's command post. For planning purpose, and to separate force missions, he assigned the USN all targets on the MACV list located north of latitude eighteen degrees thirty minutes. In this manner, Naval air

³ In retrospect, in his words, if Chuck Klusmann had known what problems shortly awaited him, he might have relinquished his wings of gold.

handled reconnaissance in northern Laos and the Air Force the south.

Within a few days of commencing Yankee Team missions, although recce could not exactly specify Vietnamese involvement on the Plain of Jars, Ambassador Unger had sufficient photographic evidence that territory formerly controlled by Neutralist and FAR troops was now in enemy hands, and was being supplied from across the border. In addition, with programmed targets photographed to his attaches' satisfaction, on the 27th, Unger requested that reconnaissance flights be suspended for two days. Military Region Two had been relatively quiet for several days, and if the enemy resumed an offensive, the missions could be reestablished. ⁴

THE THORNY ISSUE OF SEARCH AND RESCUE

For top USG leaders, who should have been better prepared, competent military search and rescue capability to cover initial U.S. reconnaissance missions was virtually nonexistent. The old inter service rivalry was much in play. Fearing an Army (MACV) attempt to control most Southeast Asian operations, in June 1963, USAF Major Saunders embarked on a program to obtain a dedicated Air Rescue Service (ARS) billet for Southeast Asia. An August report recommended that an Air Force rescue force be assigned to Vietnam. The study emphasized that Army, Marine Corps, and Vietnamese aircraft were not always available to

⁴ Segment Sources:

Charles Klusmann Email, 12/07/97.

Chuck Klusmann Phone Call, 12/10/97.

Chuck Klusmann, Email, *The Price of Freedom*, 12/27/97.

Chuck Klusmann Interview at Author's House, 04/03/98.

Ed Marolda, *Fitzgerald*, 379.

Victor Anthony, 103, 107-109.

CHECO, Messages, 05/25/64.

provide SAR coverage. Helicopter crews had no formal rescue training, and were subject to recall at the whim of their commanding officers.

Completed in September, the SAR report was submitted to 2nd Air Division Commander General Anthis, who wanted it forwarded to Admiral Harry D. Felt, Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC). However, funneled through MACV, it was curiously pigeonholed, and languished at the Hawaii headquarters until February 1964. Finally, after Saunders inquired about the report, it rotated between MACV and CINCPAC for three months.

During the report's September evaluation by MACV personnel, and quite possibly contributing to a lack of further interest, was the realization the AFARS had no equipment capable of performing the Southeast Asia mission. Six Sikorsky CH-3 helicopters were the preferred machinery sought, but those within the inventory were jealously guarded for space vehicle and astronaut recovery operations, and were not available. The only other helicopter in the USAF inventory was the delicate HH-43B, used solely in a crash-rescue role to fight fires at Air Force bases. As an alternative, ARS embarked on a crash modification program to equip the HH-43B with a more powerful turbine engine, armor plate, a larger self-sealing tank, and gun mounts. Although the Kaman Aircraft Corporation projected their manufacturing plants could not complete all contract specifications before October 1964, because of the urgent need in the field, first deliveries actually began on 25 September.

As a stop-gap, by March 1964, three standard HH-43Bs from PACAF and three from stateside units were obtained for Southeast Asia operations. However, inter service squabbling between CINCPAC and MACV delayed arrival of the helicopters to the Theater until April. There were conceptual differences between Army and Air Force leaders as to the proper utilization and

missions for helicopters. Also, up to this time, the U.S. Air Force Ranch Hand defoliation programs in Southeast Asia were semi-covert operations. Therefore, to maintain secrecy, manpower requirements were imposed on the Air Force and any introduction of SAR units would increase this ceiling by eithy six men.

The advent of Yankee Team missions over Laos made the presence of a professional military SAR unit an essential adjunct to air operations. This was especially so because enemy capture of an American military airman would present undeniable and negative international implications regarding U.S. airspace violations in neutral Laos.

During May 1964, the Joint Chiefs of Staff resolved all pending SAR issues by assigning the USAF Southeast Asian rescue missions. Despite this tardy mandate, units were not sufficiently equipped or organized to accomplish the mission. Despite this deficiency, MACV had General Moore establish a rescue coordination center in the Saigon Air Operations Center with the fallacious belief that the Vietnamese Air Force, U.S. Army, and Marine helicopter pilots could handle all SAR tasks in Southeast Asia. In short order, CINCPAC approved introduction of Air Force SAR equipment and crews to South Vietnam, and the JCS directed the Air Force Chief of Staff to deploy rescue units to the Theater. However, by the time reconnaissance flights commenced over Laos, ARS helicopters were not yet in position to be useful. Moreover, HH-43Bs, with a combat radius of only seventy five nautical miles, would have proven virtually useless for the extended missions in northeastern Laos. ⁵ Despite being available for use throughout the entire country, Air America's SAR capability was deemed inadequate to meet the overall military requirement. This narrow military mentality and

⁵ Combat Radius: The ability of an aircraft to fly to a target and back to a base.

skepticism would soon change, as our successful pilot rescues soon exceeded all expectations.

By the 29th, General Moore, recognizing his command's limited SAR capability, queried PACAF on the viability of using U.S. aircraft as necessary, in case jets were downed in Laos during Yankee Team missions. Foot dragging precluded receipt of a reply until 6 June--too late to help a Navy pilot. ⁶

⁶ Earl Tilford, *The United States Air Force: Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1980) 45-46, 48.
Victor Anthony, 109.

A paper drafted by ARMA for dissemination by the U.S. Vientiane Embassy, although somewhat dated, presented the latest information, near term speculation, and more than a little wishful thinking regarding the unfolding Lao situation.

Without stating the paltry number of operational H-34s remaining in Air America's inventory, the message stressed an immediate requirement for eight additional helicopters. These were deemed essential in the near future to perform large-scale vertical troop airlifts in difficult terrain, and to evacuate wounded. The ships, exclusively manned by American pilots, were a key element in establishing Meo morale. ¹

As the FAN situation worsened, Kong Le's forces moved further west toward mountains bordering the extreme western edge of the Plain of Jars. The major remaining portion moved into Meo-controlled territory, which effectively placed these Neutralist forces in close proximity with those of the Meo. Vang Pao enjoyed excellent relations (at the time) with General Kong Le, which presented an outstanding opportunity to form a harmonious team for present and future political benefits.

The avenue of attack for the current enemy offensive included the entire Plain of Jars. However, there were government plans afoot to thwart communist movement further west. On the northwestern Plain, Neutralist armor staged at Moung Kheung, comprising twenty-five tanks and ten armored vehicles, was expected to move southwest along Route-71 toward

¹ Vang Pao was always assured by Agency representatives that Air America personnel would go anywhere anytime and do anything to support him. With certain limitations, this commitment was honored and fulfilled throughout the war.

Route-7, with orders to hold the road against any Pathet Lao thrust westward toward Moung Soui. Coordination between Neuts and Meo troops could support the armored effort to block the road, and they were in an excellent position to destroy Pathet Lao units attempting to move west. The flat lands, where Meo guerrilla units had a history of interdicting road traffic from their positions in the northern hills, were also suitable for tactical air support.

Without revealing a source, the paper indicated that there was evidence of good morale due to adequate support. If the confidence level was maintained, the forces would be in a strong position to hold Route-7 east of Moung Soui, and prevent deep enemy penetration west of the Plain of Jars toward Sala Phou Khoun and Luang Prabang. To reinforce GM-11 at Luang Prabang, BI-13 was air lifted there from Thakhet. Targeting near Luang Prabang for potential air strikes and troop reinforcement was all the FAR could do at the time.

Intelligence sources estimated that two to three Pathet Lao battalions between Moung Kassy and Phou Khoun, if reinforced by infiltrating troops, had a capability to move south of Vang Vieng along Route-13. However, strong resistance by the two Neutralist battalions at Vang Vieng should retain the area. Helping these units hold would be a diversion of Luang Prabang government forces northwest of Phou Khoun, and of Kong Le and Meo troops in the mountains east of Route-13, producing flanking attacks on enemy positions. Support for the Vang Vieng garrison by Military Region Five battalions, along with food and ammunition, could easily be provided by both road and air.

Additional logistical routes leading to North Vietnamese supply sources afforded the enemy a greater capability for rapid offensives than in past years. Therefore, timely strikes by RLAF T-28s were deemed the only near term means available to take the

initiative. But it was paramount that government troops were willing to exploit such action. Past fighting experience by the "intrepid" warriors would tend to negate such a viewpoint, but perhaps air support could equalize the present situation. Current U.S. air missions over friendly and enemy regions would have a strong psychological effect on ground troops, especially if followed by quick and effective T-28 strikes.

The enemy had two possibilities for aggressive action in any push down Routes-4 and 13 toward the Mekong. However, because of the impending rainy season, and long supply lines subject to air and guerrilla interdiction, further advances were not deemed feasible. Coupled with FAN and Meo forces in the Vang Vieng area and RLA strikes, further advances toward Vientiane should be thwarted. However, should the enemy elect to push either toward the Nam Lik (Route-13) or beyond Borikhane (Route-4), the U.S. should be prepared to strike with or without SEATO intervention. ²

The enemy thrust was not only confined to the Plain of Jars. A concerned Vang Pao flew to Paksane from Long Tieng in order to brief Phoumi Nosavan, Kham Khong, and other officers concerning the military threat in his area. Phoumi informed the group that most individuals in Vientiane failed to realize the seriousness of the Xieng Khouang Province situation. He said Souvanna asked for twenty four hours to consider the Lao situation, and casually inquired if SEATO or the United Nations could send troops to Laos. Vang Pao remarked that a recent Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DVR) radio broadcast alleged that most of Xieng Khouang Province belonged to troops of the Democratic Vietnamese Republic (DVR). He believed this was a

² Ambassador Unger to State from a Paper Prepared by ARMA-Evidence of Communist Military Threat into Western Laos, 05/21/64.

propaganda ploy to justify the influx of large numbers of Vietnamese troops in the province.

According to Vang Pao's troops holding positions on Ban Khang Kho's (VS-204) mountainous ridgeline, the 2,000 enemy troops situated on northeast ridges stretching from Phou Louang to Phu Khe were preparing for an assault. At 0900 hours, Khang Kho was already experiencing heavy weapons bombardment. Furthermore, an attack on Ban Padong appeared imminent. During discussions, the subject of refugees generated by the fighting was broached. Phoumi interjected that since continued heavy attacks on Vang Pao's positions seemed feasible, perhaps the refugees should be moved, so as not to interfere with military operations. The general countered by saying that he did not believe there would be any conflicting problems between the mixed Lao, Meo, and Neutralist armed forces located at Padong. He cited an example of cooperation where a Neutralist soldier shot a villager's cow at Ban Na on the 20th, and had been severely reprimanded by Kong Le. ³

In the evening, following a day of collating intelligence information, Ambassador Unger transmitted a flash message to Washington updating the Military Region Two situation. Kong Le was currently at Ban Na organizing his units on hill positions in the vicinity of Site-15 and around the Plain of Jars. The general indicated that he had reestablished radio contact with all his units, including those at Moung Soui, Moung Kheung, and Moung Heim north of the Plain. Eight hundred of his men who previously defected had returned to set up a defensive position northeast of Ban Na. He considered these men loyal to the RLG.

On the 20th, an ICC team visited Vang Vieng and a point ten kilometers north. Local commanding officers reported no change

³ CIA Information Cable, 05/21/64.

in the military situation. As to the Prime Minister's proposal that Kong Le relocate to Vang Vieng, he informed the ARMA representative that he did not desire to move. The general planned to establish his command post where he was, and requested that the RLG send tents and supplies to him. He also requested assistance in evacuating civilian refugees and soldiers' families to Vientiane. After the ambassador received this request, the process began with helicopters and small fixed wing aircraft, then Caribous and the Bird and Son Pioneer.

An update on the earlier ARMA report indicated that Soviet-manufactured Neutralist tanks and armored vehicles remained at Moung Kheung. However, a move southwest toward Moung Soui was still under consideration. Two companies were in the hills controlling the approach to the village at the junction of the Nam Ngum and Route-7. One company was being held in reserve; other troops were repairing the only access road for tank movement from Moung Kheung to Ban Na Khai. An evacuation of 500 civilians from Moung Kheung to Vientiane began in the evening.

Four missions, with four T-28s in each wave, hit enemy troop concentrations northwest of Ban Pha. Battle damage assessment (BDA) from the strike conducted the previous day on Ban Pha revealed many enemy casualties.

There was no further enemy penetration into the Paksane area, and the FAR was reputedly in contact with the most forward enemy elements ten miles north of Borikhane.

As an aside, two American jets heading northeast passed overhead Ban Na while the Requirements Office representative met with Kong Le. Timing was perfect, for the American had just finished stating that the U.S. was continuing its Neutralist support. It was noted that KL and jubilant Neutralist soldiers shouted, jumped, and threw their caps into the air.

In Washington, an Agency appraisal of the current situation was forwarded to responsible parties, delineating two possible developments in Laos. Either the military situation in the country would continue to deteriorate for the RLG and ruin the Geneva Accords, or the military situation would moderate, with the enemy content to hold captured ground. In the latter case, Souvanna and the West's opposition to a Geneva conference on Laos might change. ⁴

⁴ Ambassador Leonard Unger, Situation Report as of 1700, 05/21/64.
CIA Intelligence Cable, Field Appraisal of the Current Situation, 05/21/64.

When Ambassador Unger received final approval from his Washington superiors to establish a purely civilian combat air force, the operation moved rapidly into high gear. Using "civilian" pilots to implement USG policy certainly established no precedent in undeclared wars. Prior to World War Two, the methodology had been successfully utilized. As a deniable combat arm of USG, the men of Chennault's Flying Tiger organization, the American Voluntary Group (AVG), during the Roosevelt Administration successfully countered Japanese advances in China and Burma.

A modern equivalent of the "Tigers" in Lao air operation was known as the "**A Team**" (or Alphas). The unit was primarily envisioned to conduct road interdiction as an adjunct to the renewed military reconnaissance missions. However, with a little imagination, any combat aircraft can be tasked for multiple purposes. Therefore, as the situation rapidly evolved, T-28 missions were modified to include search and rescue escort.

Much of Air America's and Bird and Son's normal work necessitated flying either close to enemy-controlled territory or deep into "no man's land." Therefore, in the event of a forced landing because of mechanical failure or battle damage, an inherent risk in the operation always included the possibility of capture. Now, with the advent of "civilian" pilots flying strike aircraft in extra hazardous regions where AAA guns proliferated, there was added danger of Americans being captured, and the operation exposed for what it was: a gross violation of the Geneva Accords. To minimize this threat and supplement the handful of Lao pilots, a high-level decision was made to form and train a **B-Team** consisting of volunteer Thai Air Force T-28 pilots (Lao T-28 pilots were referred to as the "**C**")

Team by handlers), later known by a Firefly call sign. Less politically sensitive in case of a downing, because the Thais closely resembled their Lao cousins, the small unit would fly some offensive missions in Military Region Two originally intended for Alpha pilots.

After the Alpha program was underway, in late May, the first five seasoned Thai volunteers reported to Waterpump for T-28 certification. With RLG blessing, the men were deleted from Royal Thai Air Force rosters to conduct a six-month tour of combat in Laos. Following a quick checkout by Det-6 instructors, the men began operating in northeastern Laos.

The Waterpump operation hurriedly attached two Det-6 Air Commandos to Wattay Airport to establish the first Air Operations Center (AOC), and direct and control the fledgling Firefly program. After launching from Udorn, Firefly pilots staged through Wattay Airport. Operating out of a rice warehouse, they received strike instructions from AIRA's Colonel Tyrrell, who in turn, acted on the ambassador's country team information. The planes were prepared, fueled, and loaded with bombs, rockets, and bullets by civilian-clothed U.S. Air Force personnel, flown in from Udorn each morning, along with Peppergrinder munitions in an Air America C-123. At the same time, the Thai insignia plate was switched to a Lao Erawan identification.

Alternating weeks at Vientiane, either Barney Cochran or Bill McShane would brief the pilots regarding mission targets, safest routes, altitudes, and other tactical information deemed useful. They were advised to never conduct a second pass.

Averaging three sorties a day in good weather, the Thais usually flew in a flight of three planes. Normally, the leader carried a Lao observer in the rear seat to identify targets and communicate with ground personnel.

Many early missions were flown in support of Meo forces. Vang would relay proposed targets to his adopted son, Vang Chew. The information would then be vetted through the bureaucratic system. If sanctioned, Vang Chew would fly in the back seat of the lead T-28 and spot the target.

At the completion of strike missions, because the ambassador did not want the Thai pilots in Laos overnight, they returned to Udorn before dark. In retrospect, although admitting that they were good pilots, one U.S. Air Force liaison officer recalled that Thai pilots lacked the aggressiveness necessary to accomplish mission success. This tendency produced little positive battle damage and few losses.

AMERICAN CIVILIANS

Because of a limited time frame and the lack of T-28 familiarity, recruiting first Alpha pilots assumed the form of an old boy network, consisting mostly of former U.S. Marine pilots. Vientiane Customer Earl Jones was the go-to-guy for the initial intake of the Alpha program, and he became closely involved in the early T-28 offensive activities flown by Americans.

Joe Hazen previously knew Jones, a former USMC major stationed at Quantico, Virginia. From March to April 1958 Hazen was assigned to attend a six-week "charm school" at the base. Jones was the air facility operations officer, and twice allowed Joe the use of a T-34 so he could tour the area.

Earl asked Joe if he or any other qualified Air America pilots would be interested in participating in a clandestine T-28 program. By 21 May, word had selectively spread through Operations Manager Larry Joseph's inquires. Despite the quasi-secret nature of the subject, the word spread and pilot response was overwhelming. Upset at indiscriminately being fired at by

enemy gunners over the years without recourse, everyone wanted to participate in the program, which for the first time would legally allow offensive payback measures.

Because of a positive response by several individuals, the problem then became one of selection. This was resolved by Hazen selecting three experienced small plane drivers and mostly former U.S. Marines: John Wiren, Tom Jenny, and Rick Byrne, all who possessed T-28 and close air support training. A fifth man selected, Ed Eckholdt, was a former Air Force and Air National Guard pilot. In addition to being an outstanding pilot, Ed had previous black operations experience, and possessed actual combat experience in small fixed wing aircraft. Choices had to be vetted by Fred Walker and the Base Manager. ¹

To maintain a semblance of secrecy after accepting the task, as stipulated in the cover procedure, the men resigned from Air America. Their pilot records were sanitized, and they officially became contract employees for the RLG.

The men went to Udorn on 22 May and met Det-6 Commanding Officer "Barney" Cochran. Because of the immediate requirement in Laos, they commenced an abbreviated, but intense syllabus, consisting of bombing, strafing, and napalm delivery at the gunnery range on a rock ledge ten miles southwest of the airfield near the Phu Phan mountain complex.

Eckholdt, one of the senior men in the group, flew with Waterpump instructor Joe Potter, and was released for operational flight by another Det-6 IP, Bill McShane, on the 23rd. Following the accelerated check out process, as senior man, Ed was selected to lead the first strike mission with the call sign Eagle Flight.

¹ Joe Hazen Email, 05/23/16.



Air America Captain blond Ed Eckholdt standing beside his trusty steed, a T-28 fitted with .50 caliber machine gun pods.
LaDue Collection.

A sixth man, Don Romes, was still in Bangkok on STO when information regarding the T-28 program filtered down to him. He returned to Vientiane immediately, and successfully pleaded his case to Jones about entering the program. However, Don arrived too late to participate in the first mission, as the other pilots had already completed training. Therefore, Romes was designated to conduct an after-action photo mission, which was later scrubbed, although Don eventually became the sixth member in the group.

Udorn management was chosen to conduct Alpha administrative duties. CPH Wayne Knight's involvement in the Alpha program was considerable at first, albeit purely in an administrative role.

Working closely with Ben Moore on the project, Wayne did not fly much in May, but was initially involved in reviewing pilot flight records and recruiting. Record checking for qualifications and actual pilot selection was ultimately performed by the Agency after a man volunteered. The Air America personnel department was not allowed to handle pilot records because of the elevated security classification, so Wayne expunged the successful candidates' records from the Company's easily-accessed files. Ben held all sensitive paperwork, the resignations, and new wills in his quarters, safe from prying eyes. During this period, Wayne wore a path from his AB-2 office to Ben's corner room in the Rendezvous Club facility, and he believed that they were probably the only Udorn Air America personnel "in the know" regarding the inception of the Alpha program. Following phase one, he had little involvement in the program.

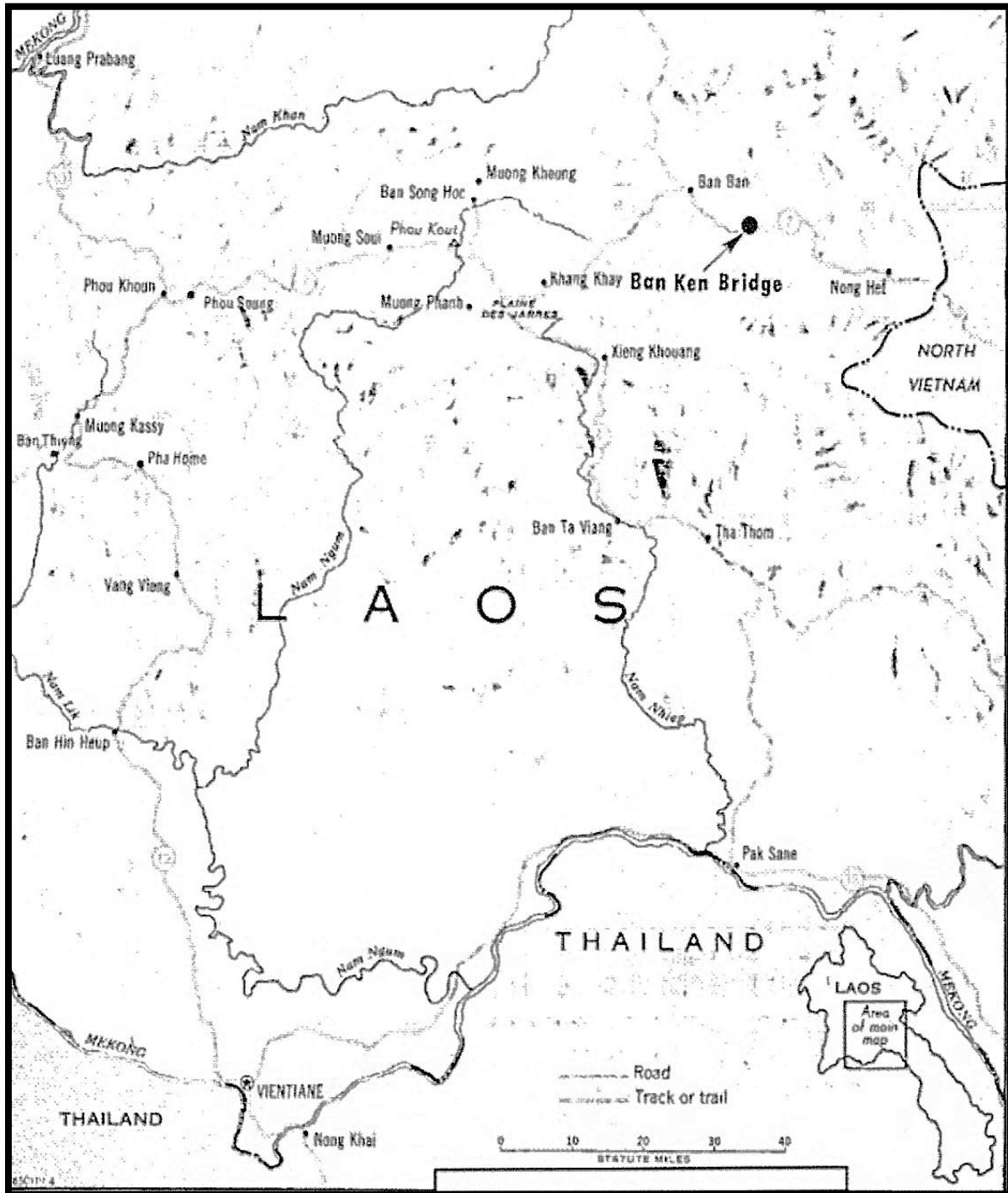
Wayne, possessing an overwhelming thirst for action, desired to participate in the program, but Ben refused to even allow him to consider applying. Other than during the initial stage, Wayne had little future input when the program expanded.

Other pilots were similarly frustrated. Bird and Son Captain Bob Hamblin very badly wanted to become an Alpha pilot. To no avail, he lobbied his AB-1 friend Pat Landry for help. Using a time honored Agency method of compartmentalization designed for secrecy and total control, the program was strictly tailored as an Air America operation. Not to be outdone by the rejection, Pat and Bob entered the Club Rendezvous one night wearing red bandannas. To the patrons' amusement, they called each other Red Baron, and like children, dashed around the bar pantomiming shooting each other out of the sky. Displaying exceptionally poor form, the transparent show clearly revealed entirely too much about a very sensitive project. As a result, Captain Moore and Landry engaged in a serious mouth fight. After the encounter, Wayne never saw Landry in the Club again when Ben was around.

The Red Baron mentality surfaced again when a few selected Alphas were spotted swigging from Singha beer quart bottles on the flight line, while conducting a walk-around with a Waterpump instructor.² Even though the offenders were theoretically no longer Company employees, Ben Moore took a dim view of the drinking infraction and complained to Taipei. The culprits were considered lucky to remain in the program.

By the 24th all American T-28 pilots were judged mission ready by Waterpump IPs McShane and Potter. However, not all possessed the same degree of ordnance delivery proficiency. The pilots were ushered into an office for a target briefing in a modern building with numerous radio antennas on the roof. Inside, huge maps and aerial photos of targets were displayed on the walls. Along with Bill Lair, Pat Landry, other Customers,

² Joe Hazen Email, 05/23/16, Joe claims no knowledge of the beer drinking incident.



Map depicting the Ban Ken Bridge location on Route-7 east of Ban Ban.
CIA Bulletin, 02/21/65.

and Bird and Son Manager Dutch Brongersma attending the briefing, they discovered that the objective selected for the following morning was the Ban Ken bridge in the Ban Ban Valley. The target spanned the Nam Mat for about 150 feet along Route-7, ten miles east of the shanty town. Destroying the short wooden bridge would significantly delay the stream of vehicular traffic and supplies to the Plain of Jars. Strike ordnance would include 500 and one-hundred-pound bombs and a hundred rounds of .50 caliber ammunition. As abundant AAA fire was expected, the plan was for each pilot to salvo an entire bomb load during a single pass. Carrying an AB-1 Customer, Bird and Son pilot Dutch Brongersma would circle the hills north of the target to observe and advise. Should a SAR requirement arise, he would alert UH-34 pilot, Captain Dick Crafts, who would be pre-positioned on a near-by hill.

Despite negative political implications, the gloves were rapidly coming off U.S policy. Ambassador Unger, who had mixed feelings regarding the use of civilian pilots to conduct combat missions, sent a late afternoon telegram to Washington prior to the mission:

"Want Department to be fully aware of degree to which we are now becoming involved in violation Geneva Accords but which are absolutely necessary if we are to meet urgent requirements in this ugly situation.

Souvanna called me on the telephone this morning regarding threatening situation around Moung Kheung [L-106]-Ban An[g] [L-22]-Moung Soui [L-108] and asked for T-28 strikes in the area...to do anything quickly we would have to turn to U.S. pilots for combat missions. Souvanna hesitated at first but finally gave me green light proceed with U.S. pilots. Accordingly I am authorizing U.S. pilots [Air America civilians] to undertake T-28 flights tomorrow for two purposes:

1) *help to hold PL advance on Ban An[g]-Moung Soui area...*

2) *cratering Route-7 east of Ban Ban. Pilots will be briefed very carefully on known enemy dispositions and AA batteries.*

On a selective basis I am relaxing certain long-standing prohibitions:

1) *Air America, particularly choppers, being permitted carry military personnel in hill areas and also war materiel;*

2) *Department already aware presence here U.S. T-28 technicians;*

3) *closer ARMA and AIRA participation with FAR and RLAF in targeting for T-28 strikes and more direct USAID/RO participation in supply arrangements."* ³

The mission began early. Following a restless night in the new Air America schoolhouse, the five Alpha pilots, wearing baseball caps, flew to Wattay Airport and shut down. Under the cover of darkness, Air Force ordnance personnel serviced the aircraft and loaded stores.

Final briefings took place in the Air America rice warehouse, where Air Commandos issued a strike order prepared by AIRA and Agency personnel. To sanitize the operation, pilots deposited all personal identification with the Customer, and were issued a card in French stating that the bearer was an aviation specialist. They were issued .45 caliber handguns and M-1 carbine rifles. In the event that they were shot down, the subject of escape and evasion was never addressed.

³ Author Note: Although a USAID directive issued at the end of 1962 stated Air America would only carry humanitarian items, we quietly continued working for the Agency carrying both hard rice and troops. Wars were not conducted only with rice, refugees, and rooftops. Of course, this part of the operation was classified, and Ambassador Unger was officially advising his out-of-the-loop Washington cronies that the situation had drastically changed.

Although encountering copious ground fire during the east-west runs, the first strike was successful, in that no one was hit and all planes returned safely to Wattay Airport. However, because of a lack of bomb delivery experience, the men's accuracy was deficient, and they only managed to crater the western approach to the bridge.

Their luck and accuracy improved later in the day. After refueling and rearming with rockets and .50-caliber ammunition, a second sortie intended to complete destruction of the bridge. However, upon arrival they discovered a more lucrative target: a ten truck convoy was impeded from further progress by a bomb crater. Captain Hazen disabled the forward vehicle, while John Wiren destroyed the last. Sandwiched between, the remaining trucks were cannon fodder for the remaining elated pilots. The first day had been bittersweet in results, but the action did much to warn the enemy to a new danger: the sting of American air power.

Captain Dick Crafts in the SAR helicopter recognized some of the T-28 pilots' voices during the initial Nam Mat bridge mission. Despite witnessing the fusillade directed at the T-28 pilots from his vantage point, Dick wanted to join the program. Therefore, the next day he wrote a letter to Chief Pilot Fred Walker stressing his 120 hours in type and requested that he be considered for T-28 transition. He was eventually selected, but not until later in the year.

In order to take advantage of surprise, show the flag, and attack enemy targets of opportunity that proliferated on the Plain of Jars, another mission was planned for early the following morning. Flying a route west of the Plain to mask their intent, the group entered the Plain from the north, and then split up to engage in their deadly game.

Combat flying is never without risks. Tom Jenny engaged in a battle with an armored vehicle. He paid for it with considerable battle damage: eight holes in the leading edges of the T-28 wings. Joe Hazen and Rick Byrne attacked a flatbed vehicle loaded with green fifty five gallon fuel drums. During the attack, Joe was surprised and concerned to observe a hole develop in the Plexiglas canopy a foot behind his head. Not to be outdone, John Wiren attacked a small bus laden with enemy troops with machine gun fire. After troops ran to uncover AAA weapons covered by tarps, John continued to attack the bus. Eventually the panicked driver rammed an abandoned PT-76 tank. The vehicle exploded and the day was won.

Several sorties followed to crater Route-7. However, the stark reality of war surfaced revealing that success was not achieved without paying the piper. That afternoon, after recovering at Wattay Airport and prior to returning to Udorn, the group received a taste of their own medicine when it was discovered that all the ships had received battle damage during the course of the day.

Commanding Officer of the RLAF, General Ma, approached the group insisting that they leave the T-28s in place rather than proceeding to Udorn. His intent was to have reporters and photographers from town observe the battle damage his intrepid Lao warriors had incurred that day. Undeterred, Joe Hazen told the general to "go get his own holes." Additional damage was found at Udorn to all five T-28s. Down time followed to repair the ships.

Despite Hazen's refusal to cooperate with General Ma, he received his due when an *Associated Press* article appeared in the Bangkok Post dateline Vientiane June 2:

"Royal Lao Air Force, air strengthened by American-supplied fighter bombers, has claimed at least two successful strikes

against communist tanks and troop concentrations in the Plain of Jars region and near the North Vietnamese border.

A communique said one of the bombing attacks against communist positions on the Plain of jars smashed ten trucks loaded with troops..

The communique was the first official announcement of results of air strikes that had been carried out on an almost daily basis since the communist offensive against Neutralist positions around the Plain began two weeks ago..."

The T-28 Alpha program was temporarily set back when an enterprising and curious reporter observed and then reported the presence of a Teutonic-looking, blond Ed Echoldt climbing out of a Lao marked T-28 at Wattay Airport. Shortly after this politically incorrect revelation surfaced, Ambassador Unger banned further offensive Alpha missions. He feared additional media, ICC, other embassy exposure, and a possible loss of a pilot to ground fire.

Despite the temporary grounding of Alpha pilots, it soon appeared that even a minor application of air power was the short-term answer to RLA deficiency in stemming communist advances. Air strikes were more often performed by Lao and Thai pilots after the latter five aircraft were released by Waterpump for operations on 1 June. Future American missions were nominally relegated to H-34 SAR escort duty for downed U.S. military pilots.

Flight Information Center Operation Specialists James Mullen and William Solin participated in the air war through the backdoor. For months they had generally operated on their own. They reported administratively to the ATOG Manager, but relied mainly on their own judgment and expertise for direction and guidance, and what they believed involved their prime mission and duty.

In May, USAF Air Operation Center (AOC) personnel were assigned to Vientiane to plan and direct indigenous T-28 pilots during flight missions. They arrived with airplanes, bombs, and a burning desire to strike the enemy where it would effect maximum damage. However, they possessed little understanding about the country, flying conditions in Laos, or the current military situation, so they turned to Air America for assistance.

After consulting with Agency Customer Earl Jones, Station Manager Roy Stitt gave Bill Solin and Jim Mullin the green light, advising them to closely support the AOC unit. Bored with briefings for mundane rice dropping missions, the men responded with a will. They enthusiastically briefed pilots and intelligence people involved in the missions.

At the request of Ambassador Unger, Colonel Robert LF Tyrrell transferred from Saigon to Vientiane as AIRA chief to replace Lieutenant Colonel Rigney. One principal, Lou Batson, an AIRA USAF Captain subordinate to Tyrrell, was charged with approving the missions. The FIC duo, Solin and Mullen, quickly discovered that Batson knew virtually nothing about T-28 capability. Moreover, the captain was considered worse than useless. Therefore, they established their own maps, plotted enemy positions, corrected erroneous data, and established a good rapport between AOC and Air America.

In time, the two men discovered that the intelligence supplied by Jones and Air America pilots was more current and pertinent than that received through AOC sources. They also received information faster than via AOC, which occasionally proved vital to AOC operations. As an example, FIC provided information about a truck convoy proceeding down Route-7 eight to ten hours before the same data was forwarded from AIRA. As a result, the FIC boys began to select more lucrative targets for

AOC, and eventually they began assigning specific targets totally independent of AOC, although this was not always satisfactory. Unaware of the entire tactical picture in the war zone, they might assign a politically sensitive target, or a target that was scheduled to be attacked by friendly ground forces.

T-28 pilots, especially the Thai, did not know the country well. Therefore, another error occurred when FIC arranged to have a C-46, returning from a rice drop, guide disoriented T-28 pilots to the target. When discovered by an irate Operations Manager, Solin and Mullen were directed to never again hazard Air America's reputation, equipment, or crews. ⁴

Before the T-28 and Alpha program consumed much of FIC's time and effort, the men diligently worked to produce an in-country site pamphlet for cockpit usage. For the first time, in lieu of personal notebooks, pilots carried official standardized data that included geographic coordinates, site elevations, runway information, facilities, and advisories for friendly and unfriendly sites. First attempts to create such a manual contained many errors in coordinates. This required constant updates. In the process, site designations were changed from

⁴ Alpha Segment Sources:

Bill Leary 1964 Notes-Interviews with Ed Echholdt, Joe Hazen, Rick Byrne, Don Romes, and Tom Jenny-also U.S. Air Force Liaison Officer Randle Regarding the Alpha Program.

Ken Conboy, 109, 110.

EW Knight Emails, 05/06/00, 07/24/00, 07/26/00, 03/27/01.

John Wiren, *Flight of the Erawan* (Houston: eBookstand, 2006) 113-118.

John Wiren, Article *Air America Log, It Takes Five to Tango*.

U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Volume 28, Laos, Document 59, Telegram From the Embassy in Laos to the Department of State, 05/24/64.

Memorandum to GML from ASZVTE, T.C. Walker, *A Short History of the Flight Information Center*, 10/12/64.

Victor Anthony, 103-104.

Joe Hazen Telephone call to the Author, 05/25/16.

Victor to Lima Sites for large airfields, while sizeable strips were designated Lima Sites. It took a few weeks for the new system to be accepted and used to advantage. It took even longer for K.K. Wang's Controller's Office in Taipei to record the change. ⁵

⁵ By late summer, FIC representatives opened an office in Udorn and cobbled together a similar site book for Thailand sites. Original Sierra designations were changed to Tango.

Ever since combined enemy forces ejected Kong Le from the Plain of Jars, and rumors of combat air operations began circulating in our group, with the flight time projected to increase again, I was anxious to return upcountry. I got my wish on the 22nd, but only to ferry replacement aircraft Hotel Foxtrot to Long Tieng, after judging it airworthy. Before leaving Udorn, I observed several senior fixed wing drivers in the compound and speculated as to their presence.

During the trip, I noted monsoon weather beginning to appear in the form of gathering dark clouds and thunderstorms. After arriving at The Alternate, I was advised to shut down and standby to fly Hotel-17 south for a periodic maintenance inspection. The lull presented me an adequate opportunity to visit. Inside the administration hut, Macorn and his PARU subordinates busily tended to their duties. Marking one constant in life, minded by the handicapped houseboy, the blackened tea pot bubbled merrily on the hibachi pot. In contrast to refueling stops, when I was operating at high port, I had sufficient time to rest at the split bamboo table and leisurely savor a glass of Ovaltine. Glancing around the hut, I noted a rogue's gallery poster of leftist politicians staring dumbly from their black and white photos. Some were red-xed, indicating those assassinated or otherwise eliminated from the coalition government. Actually, the photos were dated, for most leftist legislatures, under pressure, had already departed Vientiane for safety at Khang Khay or Sam Neua town.

Despite muttering about the traitorous Kong Le abandoning the Plain of Jars, and constant diatribes against the State Department's policy of supporting the Neutralists, Tony Poe's

spirits were high. There was scant information available regarding the current situation, but he did mention that government T-28s were more active on the Plain of Jars. He was overjoyed that friendly air was finally going to pound the loathsome foe. Without elaborating, he indicated that some "Sneaky Pete" work would soon materialize. I did not press him for additional information, but had a good idea about the subject.

Dick Elder, flying Hotel-17, one of the former Coast Guard G-model boosted-throttle ships, arrived for the swap. Always a harbinger of good news, he stated that the engine was about to fail. I took his prediction lightly and carried a characteristic load of people electing to go to the big city for business or other pursuits to Wattay Airport, without incident, then flew empty to Udorn. Sometime afterward the engine actually did quit, causing me to speculate how Elder knew that this was imminent.

LOSS OF MY MOTORIZED TRANSPORTATION

Sometime early Saturday morning thieves pilfered my motorbike, and I was once again stripped of independence. Like most days when I was home, I arose at 0530 hours for a trip to the morning market in town to purchase a few kilos of nasty smelling, garlic laced ox meat for Caesar. Descending the rear stairs and walking underneath the house, I gasped: the door to the wooden cage was open and my bike missing. A closer inspection revealed that the flimsy clasp on the door was broken. Someone knew exactly what they were doing, for the overhead night light had been removed and lay to the side in the dirt.

Sang went to the police station to file a report, while I continued to search the area for clues. With fresh tire track imprints evident on Soi Wat Po, I traced the quemoy's path

toward Wat Po, giving me a good idea of the direction our friends had taken. When I was abeam Boon's rented room just off the right side of the road, the slatted door opened and Boon stepped out preparing to go to work at the Air America facility. It had been some time since the old man had worked for and with me on the initial pool excavation, and we were still friendly. Using rudimentary Thai and pantomime, I informed him about the missing bike. He had an idea that might help. I went to the Air America compound and reported the loss to our security department, then, with Boon, we went into town to report the incident to the local police. Through an interpreter, an amazing story unfolded at the central police station. Apparently, about two in the morning, Boon's wife awakened to the sound of a motorbike starting in front of their room. Since I was the only person owning a bike in the sparsely populated neighborhood, she assumed it was me. Curious as to what I was uncharacteristically doing up so late, she woke her husband. Cracking a slat, he shined a light on two men. Strangely, he answered that he thought that I had loaned the bike to the men to make purchases for me at the market--this at two in the morning. After gathering his wits, he considered walking to Sopa to inform me about the bike. Then he recalled the house's violent history and deferred for fear of being shot as a thief, or worse, of the dog ripping him to shreds. This was ludicrous, for at that early hour, both the dog and I were sound asleep. However, it gave me pause to wonder if we had been victims of the fabled sleep gas reputed to be used by northeastern "stealy boys."

After Boon completed his story and described the men involved, the police said they would investigate. They filled out some forms, were generally polite, and were sympathetic to my loss. Realistically, they were not overly optimistic of recovery, for motorbikes and motorcycles constituted a favorite

target for a ring of professional thieves. Usually the machinery ended up at Nong Khai, where parts were hastily stripped and swapped to other bikes and then spirited across the river into Laos. More likely this had already been accomplished, and I would never see my Honda again. I could only rationalize that they did not get any bargain by stealing an old, maintenance-plagued machine. Still, it was my only mode of independent transportation.

With more time to investigate, I reexamined the light bulb, and with the naked eye, discovered a beautiful set of fingerprints. Thinking the robbers were not so smart after all, and possessing a valuable piece of evidence, I wrapped the bulb in a handkerchief and retraced my steps to the police station. I should not have wasted my time, for the unimpressed officer in charge indicated that few Thai people were ever fingerprinted.

Later, I attempted to further assess the incident. Apparently, the old Thai taboos and cultural fear of hostile spirits failed to succeed in this case. Perhaps the thieves were unaware that Jerry McEntee's houseboy, Buddy, had killed a bad guy two years previously behind the house and the body was left on display as an example to deter future aspiring night raiders. On the other hand, perhaps, like the celebrated ten percent military personnel who never receive the word, these chaps, being from another generation or era, were unaware that the house was off limits.

My faithful dog Caesar's main task in life was to act as a first line of defense against thieves. Therefore, as punishment for failing to alert me to the robbers, I gently broke a couple rotten sticks over his back. Looking at me with sad eyes, he had absolutely no idea why I chided him. Actually, if the truth was known, the episode was as much my fault as his. For some time, I had scolded him for running after a bitch in heat at night,

which prompted all the other dogs in the neighborhood to bark. Keeping him on the back porch to forestall such commotion, I secured the gate at dark and denied him access to the lower level. Also, on that particular day, we had vigorously cavorted around the area and were both very tired.

To discourage further violations of my property, I rigged a striker and blasting cap to the cage door. Scrounged upcountry, the rude booby-trap was calculated to blow a finger off any individual desiring to purloin my possessions. I left the device installed for a short period, then dismantled it, fearing one of the curious neighborhood children might unwittingly become injured.

Although I seemed destined to once again become a pedestrian, I was less interested in purchasing a replacement vehicle for another thief to steal. Besides, there was plenty of cheap transportation in the form of samlors, busses, and Air America vehicles, and I could always rely on my thumb.

Later, a leading rumor-mongering wife, with nothing better to do with her time, proposed that Sang had a hand in the theft. The supposition was somehow associated with an old boyfriend. Like many rumors, this one was never substantiated. Considering the source and the motivation, I did not ask her to elaborate and chose not to pursue it, merely discounting it as bitter rice.

Sometime after the incident, Dick Elder offered to lend me his wife's Honda. Fearful of an accident because of increasing traffic, she preferred not to drive it. I accepted the kind offer and drove the machine for a few weeks.

MR-2

At the busy Ban Na site, daily visitors from USAID and the attaché office were becoming more closely involved in an

extensive supply effort to Kong Le's forces. Airlift was supported by both Souvanna Phouma and Ambassador Unger. Additionally, there were attempts to elevate Meo morale, for Vang Pao was complaining of no hard buffer between him and the enemy. Therefore, advisors attempted to discourage total abandonment of remaining Neutralist forces from critical areas in Military Region Two, as this would expose isolated Meo population concentrations to danger from three sides: south from the Plain of Jars, east through valleys from Tha Thom, and eventually from the west.

With supplies moving steadily into Ban Na, Kong Le, to avoid exposing Meo positions, decided that he was going to remain at Site-15 and fight the enemy with Vang Pao, the only person he trusted as his comrade in arms. This was in lieu of American defense plans to move all of his units to Moung Soui. However, Kong Le believed that four battalions of support units were sufficient to hold that area. The cooperation depended on Neutralist will to fight at Moung Soui and Ban Na, and the Meo to hold positions in the hills south of the Plain of Jars. The concept seemed to have a good chance of succeeding, providing stiff resistance in all but a major enemy attack.

On the 23rd, ARMA representative, Major Duskin, visited Kong Le at Ban Na. He observed Neutralist troops departing to occupy former Pathet Lao positions. Re-occupation of more inaccessible areas was being assisted by H-34 pilots.

An estimated half of the refugee families moving off the Plain of Jars into the hills were already evacuated by helicopters and STOL aircraft to Sam Tong, as a first step in relocating them south to the Vientiane area. First loads of refugees were arriving at Wattay Airport by fixed wing from the Moung Kheung area. With the refugee movement proceeding smoothly, Kong Le decided to evacuate all dependents currently

overflowing the confines of Ban Na. To the Embassy Country Team, this seemed an excellent policy, for, released from family responsibilities, the Neutralist troops should theoretically fight more effectively. The downside of families mixed with troops was already well documented after the Phou Nong evacuation, where their presence adversely affected troop maneuverability and fighting potential.

Late information reported that enemy pressure continued on Neutralist and Meo forces. To better assess the overall Plain of Jars situation, Ambassador Unger elected to continue Yankee Team recon missions programmed for Monday, and he requested a flight over Route-7 ASAP. ¹

Since emphasis on moving refugees to Vientiane was in full swing, it was relatively easy to obtain a ride upcountry. I deadheaded to Sam Tong on DHC-4 Caribou, B-853. With no steep dives or hairy flares required, an approach to landing in the bowl was a lot less frightening than those experienced at Long Tieng.

After offloading at the busy strip, I discovered that I would have to wait until the following day to fly Hotel-15. A combination of factors contributed to a situation for which I was only semi-prepared. Since the advent of two RONs a month, the Operations Department attempted to equalize flight hours, and as the month unfolded, average target times for the pilot group were projected. If a pilot had not attained the median goal by the time his relief arrived, as per CPH instructions, the incoming pilot was obligated to wait. A lot depended on a man reaching these goals in the allotted RON period: weather,

¹ ARMA Observations, 05/23/64.
CIA Helmes to Bundy, Maxwell D. Taylor, Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff, Lucius Clay, 05/24/64.
AIRA, 05/24/64.



While a Helio Courier pilot launches downhill from Sam Tong on a mission, a H-34 is refueled by willing Meo helpers.
Marshall Collection.

maintenance, fuel, sufficient work, and the motivation to fly maximum daily hours were some of the criteria involved.

Another small factor in the delay was U.S. media's driven reporting of the massive refugee evacuation. Both CBS and NBC crews were present at Sam Tong filming the operation for a television special. A first during my tenure, it was quite unusual for any publicity on the Lao war to be sanctioned by the ambassador or Agency. It appeared that this must be an attempt to garner world-wide attention to the results of the enemy offensive, and stark reality of what was occurring to the civilian populations in Military Region Two. A consummate public relations person, especially when on his own turf, a grizzled Pop Buell stood in front of the camera being interviewed. This was his meat, for he was always at his best presenting **his** agenda and communicating **his** views and versions of the Lao situation to the American public. I edged closer to the camera, to better hear Pop "give them hell" in his salty, home-spun monologue about how **he** and USG attempted to stem the communist tide and contribute to the welfare of the Lao people. Yet, even though his subordinate co-worker Blaine Jensen was clearly visible by my side, Pop never allocated credit or glory to anyone but himself.

As I stood patiently with Blaine in the blistering heat observing the filming and air activity, I itched to participate in the ongoing refugee movement. However, I had to be content with the prospect that I might be captured on film as the crews panned the area. I doubted this though, aware that cutting room experts would tailor the day's work to suit network higher-ups on their planned agenda. I only hoped that details being offered

would not be badly distorted and that most information would appear unadulterated to the American people. ²

During the down time, I was able to add to my stock of information on the Neutralist situation. Reports specified that Kong Le's forces had salvaged some rolling stock in attempts to break out toward Moung Soui, but in the process they had abandoned substantial amounts of ammunition, reportedly two years' worth, and other supplies. Realistically, we all were aware that this ordnance would be used against the FAR and us in the future.

We were informed that it was State Department policy to wholeheartedly support the Neutralists. This was not appealing to us helicopter pilots who worried that the turncoats, if pressured, could easily switch allegiances again and do us harm or leave us to our own devices. No matter that we disliked the policy, we were there to perform a job and to do what we were told.

The ambassador received information that by 1600 hours Moung Kheung was again under Neutralist control. Armored units in the area were reinforced by two infantry companies, and an enemy attempt to sever communications between Moung Kheung and Moung Soui had been eliminated. Two other FAN companies held positions on Phou Khout--sometimes spelled Keut or Kout--a 4,500 foot hill mass straddling and commanding portions of Routes-71 and 7, roads leading to Moung Soui. A few miles further south, close to Phu Keng, one company blocked a Route-7 bridge at the junction of the Nam Pen and Nam Ngum.

² People in the United States later indicated to Pop that the filming had indeed been televised. My parents viewed a Lao TV documentary in February 1965. I told Pop, and we spent a few minutes together trying to determine if it was the same one filmed in 1964.

A week after serious fighting erupted, all Neutralist forces were reportedly out of Moung Phanh. However, combat losses for both FAR and FAN elements were sketchy at best, and were estimated at twenty five percent, but groups of men continued making their way back to Ban Na. ³

The Pathet Lao did not wait to attack Phou Khout, and the Neutralist troops withdrew at midnight after expending their last 105mm shells. They established a new position fourteen kilometers west at Ban Boua, sixteen kilos east of Moung Soui. ⁴

The Military Region Two military situation had radically altered since earlier in the month, but not the helicopter work. I again hauled maximum refugee loads from peril to safer areas where larger aircraft crews could ferry them to relocation centers around Vientiane. Over the following three days, I carried Neutralist family members in uncounted hundreds from Ban Na and the Plain of Jars to Sam Tong and Moung Soui. My earlier experience shuttling from Moung Moc to Moung Cha served me well, and I was aided somewhat by the Plain of Jars lower elevation.

Because of elevated pressure to complete refugee shuttles, most of our available H-34s and crews remained overnight at Sam Tong or Long Tieng. Sam Tong had limited facilities, hence there was a spillover to 20A. As my ship was located at the latter site, when the fog lifted in the bowl, I was obligated to hitch a ride across the ridge on Tuesday morning. This was fortunate, for because of increased hazards from enemy fire, Tony began issuing rifles and ammunition to those helicopter crewmembers desiring them. Filipino Flight Mechanics familiar with weapons were generally receptive. Most of the older men had participated

³ Leonard Unger to State, 05/25/64.

⁴ Leonard Unger to State, 05/26/64, 2000 hours.

in World War Two, and the younger ones in the Filipino Air Force. Realizing that the current situation had assumed increasingly dangerous proportions, they had no compunction about the need for protection from not only the Pathet Lao, but also the Neutralists, whom we equally did not trust. Old Punz, taciturn as he was, agreed that he would do his best to protect us. For my part, I dug the holstered Ruger .22 caliber Magnum from my bag and strapped it around my left shoulder.

Because of increasingly adverse weather, the Ban Na shuttle slowed appreciably. The movement was restricted to only helicopters and Helio Couriers, which easily flew and maneuvered under the clouds, while dipping and diving through valleys around the area. Without actually being alerted, but available, we also provided valuable SAR assets, and an umbrella for T-28 missions on the Plain of Jars.

The Neutralist folks I hauled, although obviously anxious, seemed a little calmer and better behaved than the panic-stricken Meo at Moung Moc earlier in the month. Perhaps the presence of friendly troops, AID organizers, and awareness of their ultimate destination contributed to speedy, trouble free loading. Because of the constant flow of aircraft leaving Ban Na, the people were also allowed to carry more possessions. Nothing was held back during the emergency and four more Army Caribous were being sent from the MACV inventory in South Vietnam to supplement Air America aircraft and help move people.

Because of weather constraints the previous day restricting people movement, the 27th was programmed as a "balls to the wall" (maximum) operation. Calculated to entail a maximum effort, it started for me at first light, and continued until dark, when I calculated that I had flown twelve hours and thirty minutes. Some of the flights included shuttling refugees and soldiers from the fringe of the southern Plain.

Captain Bill Zeitler, accompanied by Captain Dick Elder, also shuttled refugees into Ban Na from an outlying area. While departing with a full load, a hyper active trooper, supposed to remain with his unit, but anxious to leave the location, grasped the right wheel. Bill radioed in his humorous way for all to hear that he was standing on the brake pedals so the man did not roll off and fall to his death. ⁵

About mid-morning, as Sam Tong was becoming saturated with refugees, I was reassigned to fly troops and refugees to Moung Soui. The site was new to me at the time, therefore, for want of a correct name I logged Ban Soi. Although largely unimproved, the long strip there was easily accessible for larger aircraft like the C-123, which, in addition to ferrying considerably more people south than a Caribou, returned with helicopter fuel.

At the time Kong Le was in the process of withdrawing from the Plain of Jars. With Vang Pao's attention focused on his left flank around Khang Kho and bolstering Padong, the generals agreed that the FAN would hold the Ban Na line.

The Neuts performed an acceptable job, but unrealistically demanded daily shipments of fresh meat, vegetables, and fruit from FAR stocks in Vientiane. Halfway into FAN's second week at Site-15, Vang Pao realized that the supply runs were seriously demoralizing irregular Meo and Lao Theung troops at the site. Therefore, taking a calculated risk, Vang Pao pushed to move Kong Le and his people to the Moung Soui area, and the Meo from Moung Soui environs to Padong.

FAN units still occupied territory in the Moung Heim valley north of the Plain of Jars, at Moung Kheung, at Moung Soui, and farther south at Vang Vieng. Plans by military leaders attached to the embassy originally envisioned Kong Le positioning all his

⁵ Bill Zeitler Interview, 09/01/01.

troops at Moung Soui. Already garrisoned by BI-5, 8, and 14, Kong Le initially resisted advice to move his command post until late May. By that time, realizing that supply at Ban Na would always remain challenging because of a poor runway, high winds, weather, no access roads, tenuous relations with the dissimilar Meo, and Vang Pao's change of mind, the tiny general acquiesced to pressures to relocate.

Soon the transition to Moung Soui began. To buffer a possible attack on Sam Tong, Vang Pao lobbied the Vientiane General Staff to forward defensive troops to Site-15. That represented the first FAR inroad into Sam Tong. Ironically, over time, this radical change also became the means and contributing factor of erosion of Vang Pao's power by Souvanna Phouma's nephew, Colonel Chansom, who was Vang Pao's second in Military Region Two command structure. ⁶

The flight northwest to Moung Soui entailed almost twice the distance as that to Sam Tong. About fifteen air miles, it included passing near friendly Meo sites I had worked at Houei Ki Nin (Site-38) and San Luang (Site-41); and also over wild mountainous terrain that included deep ravines, heavy forests, and the Nam Ngum and its tributaries. Many small villages, at which the natives appeared to be engaged in agriculture, dotted both sides of my flight path.

On one outbound trip from the fringe of the Plain of Jars, we received copious ground fire. Punz responded immediately with counter fire and the firing ceased. At least in that particular area, people on the ground were aware that we were now armed, and possessed the capability to return fire. Perhaps they might think twice before shooting at a helicopter again. Not certain

⁶ Ken Conboy, 110.
Blaine Jensen Letter, 04/29/96.

whether the bangers were Neuts or Pathet Lao, the incident convinced me of the value of a Flight Mechanic bearing arms. It did not matter where you fired. Just observing flashes from the cargo door normally provided sufficient action to discourage the bird shooters. The incident was an excellent object lesson for me. Consequently, for the remainder of my Air America tour, I encouraged all my Flight Mechanics to carry loaded weapons and suppress ground fire at will.

With fuel staged at Mounng Soui, I worked until nearly dark before returning to Sam Tong. The month was beginning to look not only good, but great, if only the flight time held.

I was tired, which was manifested after departing the cockpit, as my adrenaline-depleted body signaled my fatigue. I had no desire to eat or talk; only rest in my advanced state of exhaustion. Even lying on a canvas cot did not fully relieve my jangling and hyperactive nerves. It was somewhat mitigated after dropping off into a troubled sleep, but rarely did I awake refreshed. Fatigue was cumulative during helicopter operations. Pilots were aware that long periods of high intensity work could lead to a gradual degradation of reaction time and coordination, a condition that was much more prevalent in helicopters than in airplanes. Every pilots' tolerance to heat, stress, vibrations, and noise was different, and individual aviators dealt with the problem the best way possible. For me, it was a matter of pacing myself and adjusting to flying numerous hours, but the first couple of days of maximum flying always seemed more challenging until my body and mind became accustomed to the unusual demands. I found that, much like an athlete achieving a "second wind," I could continue to fly without seemingly losing critical skills.

Ten to twelve hours of sitting virtually motionless in a vibrating, uncomfortable UH-34D tended to numb my body and senses. During such periods, I reacted to challenging situations

according to my training and instincts. My nerves were irritated and temper short due to a combination of debilitating vibrations, stress, and particularly increased noise levels. In sufficient quantity over a period of time, despite engineers' attempts to suppress damaging noise with sound attenuating helmets, excessive noise actually affected performance. This was especially true when exposed to long periods of radio static, crackle, generator and inverter whine, the slap of rotor blades, transmission hum, roar of exhaust stacks, and engine chug. Unfortunately, the Sikorsky H-34 exhibited all these negative factors.

Thursday the 27th the Neutralists at Moung Kheung resisted enemy pressure, but finally withdrew toward Moung Soui after destroying a majority of their rolling stock. This did not bode well for the defense of Lima-108.

Enemy forces continued probing southeast of the Plain, forcing the Tha Vieng garrison to leave the site.

West of Tha Vieng an elevated Meo site was lost. This was just another in a long line of harassing and interdicting positions lost to the enemy. ⁷

On the 28th high winds prevented the ARMA representative from landing at Ban Na. This was also the case in the morning for larger STOL aircraft. "Blackie" Mondello replaced Punzalan as my Flight Mechanic. Except for stragglers still arriving from the Plain of Jars, with the refugee movement largely completed at Ban Na, emphasis switched to helping beef up Vang Pao's eastern flank in the Padong-Khang Kho sector. Skirting thunderstorms and low clouds, I burned two fuel loads until Mike

⁷ Central Intelligence Bulletin, Daily Brief, 05/28.64. Laos: Communist forces are advancing against Moung Soui, the neutralist blocking position on Route 7 west of the Plaine des Jarres.

Marshall arrived to relieve me, as late in the month, there was a lot of crew swapping to equalize flight time.

During the down time afforded by inclement weather, I took the opportunity to relax and learn a little more about our situation. Tony indicated that because of the recent Pathet Lao surge across the Plain of Jars, there was a general sense of panic all along the RLA's command chain. However, there was some elation over T-28 action that caused temporary setbacks to the Pathet Lao timetable to take control of Laos. We all wondered if the minor RLAF escalation would foster air retaliation from the other side. If so, with nothing to counter unfriendly air, those of us flying helicopters represented "sitting ducks," especially when working near the border north of the Plain of Jars.

There was solace in the fact that the annual monsoon had apparently begun, and the time frame was quite late for an enemy push farther south or to hold captured territory. In former years, at the onset of the rainy season, the enemy withdrew to major logistic bases or across the northwest Democratic Vietnamese Republic (DVR) frontier to rest and refit until resuming military activity in December or January. As would occur in future years, this year they had bases further west and supplies continued to roll in, so, at the very least, it looked like they intended to stay in place.

Other factors relating to the current enemy push included optimism that if they journeyed too far south and it was perceived that they would make a concerted run on Vientiane or Paksane, the southeast Asia Treaty Organization Forces (SEATO) or the U.S. might unilaterally jump into the fray. Like the movement in May of 1962, a Marine expeditionary force and supporting units could quickly return to Udorn as a show of force or a formidable attacking unit.

As a result of the confusion, rumors constantly circulated about enemy disposition. One hundred thousand Chinese troops were reputed to be staged in Hanoi. Suggestions were forwarded that our air forces should strike Hanoi and the southern logistic routes to relieve pressure on the current contested areas. Moreover, it was believed that if the Chinese and Vietnamese did not meddle in Lao affairs, the RLA could easily deal with the Pathet Lao. Perhaps this scenario presented an overly optimistic assessment for a timid army more proficient in running than fighting. However, Meo forces did demonstrate a stronger resolve when their homeland was threatened. Still, they too feared the Vietnamese, believing them to be invincible nine-foot tall giants. Some of these attitudes could have developed from the great disparity in firepower between the opponents. Our people were expected to fight with antiquated M-1 Garand rifles, M-1/M-2 carbines, and too few crew-served weapons. In contrast, the enemy were experts with mortars, and possessed far superior AK-47 assault rifles that instantly spat out twenty rounds of devastating fire. In addition, their units had been fighting for years, and displaying an iron will, were tough, disciplined, dedicated, and motivated by merciless communist political doctrine.

Despite the disparity in weapons and experienced manpower, unwilling to provide military capability the enemy might capture, State Department policy continued equipping the RLA with old fighting tools. Perhaps USG was right in limiting modern rifles to RLG troops, but when does a dog cease chasing his tail? Do troops withdraw and run because they are attacked by superior armament? Provided equal or superior firepower, would they fight? At the time, no one in authority was willing to venture a guess or test these questions. An answer would have to wait until later years.

While I deadheaded to Vientiane on Helio Courier B-857 and to Udorn on C-123, N05005, elements of a Neutralist BI reoccupied a key hill position on contested Phou Khout. Enemy units still occupied the lower slopes northeast and south of Phou Khout. ⁸

Because of continuing bad weather, Mike Marshall did not begin flying Hotel-15 until the 30th. In an attempt to fortify Vang Pao's northwestern flank and support the Neutralist forces at Moung Soui, loaders at Long Tieng had Mike shuttle troops to San Louang (Site-41). Located adjacent to the Nam Ngum, thirteen miles north of Sam Tong, seven miles southwest of Moung Soui, and five miles east of Xieng Dat, San Luang was an old Meo site that we had worked since returning upcountry. With fuel staged at the site, Mike also moved refugees to Moung Soui and Moung Cha.

⁸ Leonard Unger-Ground Situation, 05/28/64.

The pool officially opened with considerable fanfare on the 29th. All the important persons from Taipei, plus Jim McElroy and Company attorney Clyde Carter from Washington attended the party. I was less than enthusiastic about the event and remained in the new bar, as there was still a rumor floating around that some of us were going to be permanently transferred to Seaboard World at Vientiane. Nothing was certain yet, but when the decision was finally made and implemented, we would be moved with haste.

When completed, the new bar served as a preferred watering hole and chat room. It replaced the operations building steps as a sunning, gathering, and gossip place, which formerly had annoyed Ben Moore. The Club bar was a favorite nurturing location for our small crewmember force, so starved for social discourse and insight into what was occurring within our small organization. With pilots constantly rotating upcountry, in the absence of a Vientiane style FIC, it became the logical place of choice for one to quietly disseminate the latest developments or glean valuable, possible life saving intelligence on the current Lao situation from others recently arrived from upcountry. It was comforting to have advance knowledge about enemy activity prior to journeying upcountry. Although we did not give away the store, depending on our state of sobriety, we gave little thought to the friendly Thai bartender, or strangers who wandered into our sanctuary.

As a personal touch, we were encouraged to carve our names or initials into the long, sturdy wooden bar top before it was coated with shellac. As in the Club dining room, to control thievery, chits were required to purchase drinks in lieu of cash. An overhead bell, strategically placed near the bartender,

often clanged to herald an event, a special occasion, or just for the hell of it for someone to purchase the house a round. Combined with happy hour, at times great exuberance caused more drinks to be lined up in front of a patron than could be realistically consumed in an evening. Consistent with ancient military tradition, visitors or newbies to the bar were conned into wearing a cover, resulting in their obligation to buy the house a round of drinks.

For those so inclined, dart board games, a favorite form of entertainment that spilled over from the Marine snack bar, proliferated. Kanach and a few of the mechanics like Stan Wilson were the most adept at this game. Scratch was quite tall and after leaning forward, appeared to be halfway to the board before even launching an accurate dart. Liars dice, normally played for drinks, was also popular.

Overall, the new bar was a great place to spend a few hours. Separated from the dining and movie rooms, the cool, refreshing establishment was no longer subject to more sober individuals' complaints about excessive noise. It was a place of little personal animosity, general good humor, and amusing stories calculated to double one over in laughter. Occasionally, lighthearted barbarism prevailed. While Don Buxton was still with us, belly-bumping contests were in vogue. Don, who had a rather large abdomen, was the undisputed champion of the mano a mano contact sport. One afternoon, I unwisely challenged him to a duel. Before long, bent over and hurting, I sheepishly withdrew, happy to still possess an intact spleen.

The new bar almost, but not completely, replaced our casual morning beer and bitch sessions at Charlie Weitz's house. Charlie was still a legendary figure when compared to beer consumption and conversation of an ordinary human male. In

addition, Charlie never seemed to get sick or suffer the ill effects of a hangover.

One day, while feeling my oats at Charlie's house, I decided that I would match the undisputed suds king beer for beer until one of us cried uncle. While swapping stories, the activity continued throughout the morning and into early afternoon. As other pilots faded away to pursue other interests, we decided to move the contest to the new bar. By then, I had imbibed so much that I considered myself almost sober. I had learned my lesson and conceded that continuing the friendly challenge was fruitless. Charlie appeared sloshed, but even though leaning forward at his characteristic forty-five degree angle, he was indeed unbeatable when it came to serious boozing. Of course, my penalty for losing the match was his constant retort, "*Casterlin, you are a candy ass!*"

In addition to that nicety, he was renowned for shouting, "*No one is perfect, and eating is cheating.*" However, as I observed Charlie at his favorite hobby, I realized that, in fact, he did cheat. In between imbibing phases, he sipped a glass or two of water to hydrate his body and slow the alcohol adsorption. It was a technique that a consummate drinker learned over the years. Of course, none of us was sufficiently intelligent to realize what he was actually doing.

With the battle decisively won, the "eating is cheating" refrain took a back seat, and Charlie ordered a waiter to bring him a huge steak. We were still inebriated, but I did not realize how much until observing Charlie consuming pieces of the burned cow with his fingers, and licking the plate with obvious joy. That completed my day of fun and games. I departed for the house preparing for the thundering headache pre-ordained for the next morning.

Intermittent rain on pool party night failed to spoil the festive evening, only dampening it. Since I no longer enjoyed personal transportation after my bike was stolen, I tossed off a couple drinks and caught a B-Bus home.

Wayne Knight, working late and still in uniform, left his office occasionally to observe the festivities during the early hours of the party. Later, he rescued a drunk Thai, who had remained unnoticed and was quietly drowning in the pool.

Several Air Commandos attended the party. Late in the evening, Det-6 instructor pilot Joe Potter was deep in his cups. Finding a semi-reclining chair at poolside, Joe settled down for a little snooze. Clyde Carter, sans one leg, and not wanting to embarrass others, had not swum earlier. Very late, spying an empty pool, and desiring privacy, Clyde elected to take a dip. Carter's sizeable prosthesis reached well up his thigh. He stripped, removed the artificial limb, and hung it over a lawn chair close to Potter. While Clyde swam, Joe awoke. Still groggy, he spied the faux body part. Believing it attached to a living person, he began what possibly became the most one-sided conversation of all time. Knight was drinking beer with other late participants on the sidewalk adjacent to the pool when he overheard Joe's chat with himself and sized up the situation. Calling the others' attention to the event, they all listened to Joe's banter for a few minutes until he drifted off to sleep again. Throughout Potter's monologue, Clyde continued to swim and was unaware of the humorous event. ¹

The Air America School opened with a pilot's wife acting as a temporary supervisor. At the time, it was not really an established school with a conventional curriculum. Calvert correspondence courses were still employed by interested mothers

¹ EW Knight Emails, 06/14/00, 04/30/02.

to teach their children; but now in a more controlled one-roomed schoolhouse environment, parents could rotate services and innovate teaching skills. According to Mrs. Deanie Estes, the arrangement was quite satisfactory compared to strictly home schooling.

During the first two days of June a high level conference attended by fifty five U.S Government principals was held in Honolulu to discuss South Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and future planning for Southeast Asia. As related to the increasingly important Thai factor, Ambassador Martin reported that the Thanom regime had smoothly consolidated its power and was operating satisfactorily. Prime Minister Thanom appeared to be in charge, and was publicly deferred to by General Praphas. Air Marshall Dawee, as Deputy Minister of Defense and Chief of Staff Supreme Command, was conducting an increasingly important and useful role coordinating military affairs. Coup rumors were still rife in the country, but were greatly diminished.

The principal component of Thai foreign policy was its reliance on the Rusk-Thanat agreement of 6 May 1962, constituting a defense alliance with the U.S. The Thai understood that U.S. nuclear power was overwhelming, and conventional military power had been greatly strengthened over the past three years. However, they were not certain that the U.S. was prepared to use its overwhelming force to attain policy goals in Southeast Asia. Instead, they believed that the U.S. would only threaten military force, while the real intent was to seek the best political solution. Until sure of U.S. resolve, they would wait to act.

Employing Thai troops to counter a Pathet Lao advance was under consideration in Bangkok, and five army companies had already been deployed to the northern border. Martin went on to say that Thai military leaders did not believe crossing the Mekong would bring them into extensive contact with the PL. They could do this unilaterally and still be able to rely on the

protection of the U.S. nuclear umbrella should such action provoke a major communist attack on Thailand. Even if Thai forces occupied Mekong Lao river towns, a major move deeper into Laos was doubtful.

A host of questions followed that covered the entire spectrum relating to Thai motives, and capability to handle a cross border operation. Admiral Felt believed that Thai leaders were concerned with re-occupying their former territory in Sayaboury Province, but Ambassador Martin countered that such a goal might have been true under Sarit Thanarat, but not Thanom.

Secretary of State Dean Rusk wanted information regarding the fighting ability of the Thai. Answers varied, and no one really knew if they had performed satisfactory work in Korea. William E. Colby, Chief of CIA's Far Eastern Division, indicated that Thai PARU provided the leadership element for the Meo fighting in Laos, and had displayed high qualities of initiative and aggressive leadership. General Taylor believed that the Thai could handle the Pathet Lao, but there was some doubt whether they could stand up to the trained and aggressive Vietnamese soldiers. Secretary of Defense McNamara stated that the Thai had a limited military capability to deal with any major combined communist attack. Felt supported this conclusion and added that the Thai had a low caliber of senior leadership in the RTAF.

Much discussion centered on a projected air war against North Vietnam and targets listed for strikes; contingency plans were structured and lasted for two months. ¹

After another visit on the first, the ARMA representative again consulted with Kong Le, who was still present at Ban Na. The self-proclaimed general was disturbed by the continuing

¹ FRUS Memorandum 273, Thailand 1964, .
John Bowman ed, *The World Almanac of the Vietnam War*, 76.

independence and lack of common sense of Neutralist armor against enemy defenders east of Moung Soui. To ARMA, it looked like there was intrigue to undermine the commander. This was reflected in Kong Le's conversation, and he even made reference to General Amkha being involved. Afterward, ARMA flew to Moung Soui for talks with Major Sing. ²

AMERICAN AVIATOR DOWN

On 4 June, Secretary of State Rusk requested that the frequency of Yankee Team reconnaissance flights be reduced to one or two sorties a week. These could be supplemented by demand flights related to specific objectives. CINCPAC Hawaii agreed with the request, but reminded the secretary that the main purpose of the flights was to provide vital intelligence for decision making. In Military Region Three and Military Region Four, recce flights were required to keep informed on communist supply routes from the Democratic Vietnamese Republic (DVR) into South Vietnam through Laos. ³

On the sixth, the USS *Kitty Hawk* had been deployed for more than eight months. With the USS *Constellation* in place at Yankee Station, following a final unarmed recce mission, *Kitty Hawk* was preparing to rotate to CONUS.

For Lieutenant Chuck Klusmann it would constitute his final flight over Laos and unfortunately his last taste of freedom for three long and arduous months.

For me, it marked the beginning of both a highly active and full year of excitement, and of extreme stress while upcountry.

² ARMA Vientiane, 06/04/64.

³ CHECO, 06/04/64.

Although new targets were specified, Klusmann's mission constituted a repetition of recent ones flown in the Plain of Jars area. One mission was scheduled east along Route-7 toward Ban Ban. By then the pilots were familiar with the town and the valley, known as "Lead Alley" because of flak hazards. Klusmann was tapped to lead a flight of two, with Jerry Kuechmann as his wingman.

Prior to entering Laos, they refueled from A-4 tankers. After topping off, they encountered some thunderstorm activity and limited visibility. Therefore, without visual navigational aids they proceeded by dead reckoning. Cruising above a solid cloud cover prevented ground reference of the Mekong River checkpoint at Paksane, so they descended east of the initial point (IP). Because cloud cover still prevented adequate visibility, they turned south and descended again in the vicinity of Pakse, where Chuck knew that the terrain was reasonably flat. Spotting the Mekong, they turned north toward the Plain of Jars under the cloud cover at treetop level and 600 knots. They were just about to abort the mission when, nearing Moug Soui, the base of the clouds lifted to 4,000 feet, allowing visual contact of the Plain of Jars.

Because of low clouds, original targets were deemed unavailable, so, after turning toward Moug Soui, Chuck decided to film terrain on the Plain for orientation purposes. After this run, he flew up the valley to Ban Ban as far as the eastern Ban Ken bridge, and then turned south. Because of the characteristics of the color film loaded in the Crusader's nose compartment, he climbed to altitude for additional orientation shots. This completed, the pilots descended to 1,500 feet and headed northwest along Route-7 at 550 knots. Jerry flew echelon right to call the break off the target and report any ground fire.

As they passed Khang Khay, small caliber anti-aircraft fire became more intense, and Chuck observed tracer rounds darting past his windscreen. Five miles beyond Khang Khay, Jerry reported that Chuck had been hit. Fuel streaming from his left wing indicated that it was time to vacate the area.

Calling Jerry, Chuck broke to the right and began a climb. Despite being warned to stay out of politically sensitive Thailand, he planned to head that way and punch out there if necessary. Ninety degrees into the turn, he felt a strong jolt from 37mm fire. It was the first time out of four incidents that he had felt the impact of AAA. The F-8U yawed to the left, kicked three times, and straightened out. He noted diminishing pressure in both hydraulic system gauges and Jerry radioed that his left landing gear was extended. In less than two minutes the flight controls froze and the plane began rolling to the right. At 10,000 feet and 450 knots, with the plane almost inverted and the nose falling through, it became imperative to punch out. It had been fifteen minutes since entering the target area.

After pulling the curtain, the ejection process proceeded normally and the parachute opened as published. When it stopped oscillating, he spotted the Crusader ending its life, splashing in a fireball into a canyon. On the way to the ground, Chuck heard a lot of small arms fire, but despite the fact that there was no other target in the area, none of the fire appeared too close to him.

Toward the end of his descent, he saw that termination would be in a small clearing surrounded by trees. There was only one small tree in the clearing, and the ever present Murphy dictated that he land on top of it. The collapsing chute pulled him twenty feet through the branches, causing him to land awkwardly on the ground off balance, with one leg splayed outward, painfully wrenching his right hip, knee, and foot. He

also noted that his right arm was badly scratched. After extricating himself from the parachute straps, barely able to stand upright, he wedged his foot in a bush and pulled until a joint popped and the major pain subsided. Then he surveyed and culled what survival gear he might need. For improved ease of movement, he removed the torso harness and floatation gear. He cut sections of parachute shroud lines and then, after zipping up the front, tied these to the bottom of the harness. It made a fine pack into which he stuffed useful items, then he slung it over his shoulder. As instructed in survival school, he departed the area and began a slow half walk, half crawl up the hill, moving to high ground. Because of the previous shooting that seemed to emanate from several areas, he was not sure which direction to move, but believed south was a likely option.

With his injuries hampering movement, Chuck found it difficult moving through the three-foot high saw grass. A deep ravine, covered with heavy undergrowth running up the side of the mountain, provided some cover and concealment. Winded, he rested in a gully. He spied a trickle of water springing from the rocky crevasse, but thirsty as he was from the ordeal, rejected it. Instead, he treated his injured arm.

Jerry, his wingman, circled for about ten minutes. After he binged, the area became very quiet. Jerry Kuechmann then returned to the Kitty Hawk, where he was ordered to approach the bridge and, while drinking a cup of coffee, briefed the Captain and Admiral about the incident. At the same time, an A-3 was positioned on the ready spot preparing for a trip to Cubi Point. His superiors told him to board the A-3, return to the downing site, and attempt to ascertain what rescue measures were underway. He boarded the plane and, despite the pilot's

protestations, redirected the aircraft to Klusmann's area. They remained on station until fuel was almost exhausted. ⁴

After an hour, Chuck spotted what he believed to be an observation aircraft. Assuming his UHF emergency beeper (lacking voice capability, the device was pre-set to 243.0 MHz) was working, Chuck aimed and flashed his signal mirror toward the aircraft. ⁵

A few minutes after noon, an RLAFF T-28 pilot, call sign Eagle Green, and an Air America C-123 pilot, heard a Mayday call transmitted on UHF guard from Corktip 920. A pilot onboard the C-123 inquired as to the problem, location, and requirement. Jerry Keuchmann (Corktip 32) confirmed that his flight leader was down south of Ban Ban. ⁶

AIR AMERICA

After departing Long Tieng, Helio Courier Captain Tom Jenny was passing Ban Na at a hundred miles an hour with a load of cratering charges for Ban Vieng (LS-89), a Meo site in the mountains north of the Ban Ban Valley, when he heard a Mayday call on VHF. ⁷ Unsure of the source, Tom jotted the reported UMT coordinates (UG4972) on his map. Then he called the Vientiane

⁴ Until a future squadron reunion, the failure to retrieve Chuck that day had haunted Jerry Keuchmann for years.

⁵ Segment Sources:
Statement Concerning the Capture, Imprisonment and Escape of Lieutenant Charles F. Klusmann, USN.
Chuck Klusmann Phone Call, 12/10/97.
Charles Klusmann Email, *The Price of Freedom*, 12/27/97.
Charlies Klusmann Interview at Author's house, 04/03/98.
CIA Cables, 09/02/64.

⁶ Earl Tilford, 48.
Chuck Klusmann.

⁷ Helio Couriers were not equipped with UHF radios, so this radio call likely came from the C-123.

radio operator with information regarding a downed pilot's location. After a delay to check map coordinates, the operations manager (probably Tom Khron) reminded Jenny that Ban Ban was a hostile area, and, pending further information, warned him not to venture there. Taking this under advisement, unaware that the downed pilot was an American, Jenny continued "around the horn" (skirting the Plain of Jars, a western route past Phou So, Phou Vieng, and direct to Ban Vieng) to his destination, and offloaded the munitions. Then he headed southwest toward the plotted coordinates, about eighteen miles away.

One could not have asked for a more experienced and talented pilot to assist in an SAR mission. An old timer and former Marine Corps pilot, Jenney had been involved in Operation Millpond, flying B-26s from Takhli. Presently, in addition to flying the Helio, he was one of five selected pilots involved in the T-28 Alpha program.

Having worked in the downed area when Site-71 was friendly, Jenny flew west into a valley with rolling hills. He observed a parachute on a grassy knoll, and then was surprised by a mirror flash in his eyes. Identifying a pilot, Jenny jazzed the engine and wagged his wings, while the pilot popped smoke, a seemingly unwise action in enemy territory. After ascertaining that the area was suitable for an H-34 landing, so as not to reveal the pilot's position, Jenny moved two miles west, orbited, and radioed for help.

Within fifteen minutes, Don Campbell, driving a C-123, arrived to act as the Air America SAR coordinator and relay station. The air armada steadily increased. A Caribou flown by Bob La Turner and one by Joe Hazen arrived sometime later, but no helicopters appeared. The delay continued, while Vientiane

stalled a rescue attempt until additional information became available.⁸

Customer Terry Burke was working at Long Tieng when a pilot informed him that an aircraft was down somewhere in the northern region. The type of aircraft or exact location was not specified. Tony was not available, so, with a bare minimum of information available, Terry departed with PIC RC Smith in a Helio Courier for Bouam Long to further investigate the situation and offer help if required. When he arrived at the site, Tom Moher, Bill Cook (Cook had replaced Marshall in Hotel-14 on the 5th), and their Filipino Flight Mechanics, who had been working the upper Military Region Two area, were shut down just off the strip. After receiving a call relayed from Vientiane, they had proceeded to Site-88, refueled, and were standing by for further instructions. One major consideration was helicopter fuel, not in plentiful supply at Site-88, or in fact anywhere north of the Plain of Jars. Therefore, the amount available was equally apportioned between the two H-34s.

At first, there was a long delay before launching. Maximum confusion prevailed concerning the type of aircraft and pilot involved. Everyone assumed an Air America or T-28 plane was down, but after noses were counted, all airborne ships and pilots appeared fine. At some point, crews were surprised to hear something about a downed military jet, but the transmission was garbled. Such a message was treated as incredulous, for no one had prior knowledge of or believed that U.S. military planes were flying inside Laos. Instead, they assumed it must be a T-28 driver, perhaps an Alpha who was down. They attempted to confirm

⁸ Tom Jenny, Emails, 05/08/00, 05/21/00.
Tom Jenny Phone Call, 05/08/00.
Joe Hazen Email, 05/23/16, Joe claims he was not close to the attempt to rescue Klusmann.

this, but for security reasons, everyone refused to transmit or reveal anything over the air. There was also considerable uncertainty as to the pilot's exact location, and concern about their unarmed helicopters flying over some of the most heavily armed sections of the Plain of Jars and its periphery. While one pilot monitored cockpit radios (the auxiliary power unit (APU) in the cabin section produced electricity without depleting the battery), word was relayed that a parachute was sighted in high grass on the side of a hill downslope from a treeline on a ridge near the Phou Nong area. The crews anxiously awaited a command decision from Vientiane, as to whether a rescue attempt should be conducted. During this period, with little additional information, Burke and the pilots attempted to conceive a viable rescue plan.

Based on the pilot's reported location close to recently captured territory around Phou Nong, Terry recommended that Thai PARU Captain Pichit fly in the cockpit with Captain Moher. Assigned to Phou Nong in the months leading up to the early May attack and its subsequent loss, Pichit was intimately familiar with the immediate area. Burke proposed that he ride in the Helio Courier and lead the pack, because he knew the locations of most fixed AAA, and other enemy positions between Bouam Long and the pilot's reported position. He would precede the helicopters until close to the area, and then Captain Pichit would help navigate the H-34s around the enemy emplacements at Phou Nong. ⁹

Dick Elder, a third helicopter pilot assigned to the northern region, was working out of Houa Moung in Hotel-13. During area shuttles, supporting Colonel Tong and Colonel Kham Sao's efforts in the region, he heard many cryptic radio calls,

⁹ Terry Burke Email, 02/20/04.

but could not determine their meaning, as no one would specify an exact problem. He could only ascertain that no emergency had been declared, but that designated helicopters were immediately proceeding to LS-88 for a briefing. With this information, he elected to continue working the Site-58 area.

After what seemed to be a long interval, a relayed message from the Vientiane Oscar Mike instructed the H-34 pilots to launch south toward an abandoned site at Khang Hong (Site 68). Dick, curious as to what was transpiring, hoped to obtain more information, and perhaps lend assistance, but Moher would reveal nothing. ¹⁰

In order to arrive in the target area in a group, after leaving the safety of the mountains, the three crews were required to fly south across flat, open terrain, and Route-7 in the Ban Ban Valley. Hugging the deck to avoid detection, and trying to keep ahead of the helicopters, feeling much like a sitting duck, Terry worried about active AAA sites near Ban Ban and along stretches of the road. While circumnavigating suspected bad areas, he alternated between his map and the ground while attempting to recall exact enemy positions plotted on the chart at Long Tieng. It did not help anyone's morale or concentration on the job ahead that the fixed wing pilots constantly screamed for helicopter support. ¹¹

The Klusmann downing was a very significant event. It was the first inkling for those of us working in the Theater that the U.S. military possessed no rescue assets or realistic procedures to implement and conduct SARs in Laos. Furthermore, at the Air America Udorn facility, no one in management, not

¹⁰ Dick Elder Interview at Author's house, 08/31/88.
Bill Leary 1964 Notes, UTD.

¹¹ Terry Burke, 02/20/04.

even those in AB-1, were aware of the top secret U.S. Navy Plain of Jars reconnaissance missions.

Ironically, Commander of Saigon's Second Air Division Headquarters, General Moore, was in Udorn at the time to confer with his Deputy Commander, Colonel Jack Catlin, regarding a 15 June search and rescue conference.¹² Colonel Catlin, a friendly individual who sincerely liked Air America people, frequented the Club and became a card-playing crony of Dick Elder and Herb Baker.

The Klusmann drama unfolded in Udorn just after lunch. Wayne Knight was in his office when a puzzled CM Chu called him into the radio room to listen to some "strange" calls on UHF Guard (243.0), a frequency that was constantly monitored by radio operators. Interested, Wayne listened to the radio traffic, until he obtained a reasonable grasp of the problem. Eventually a transmission "in the clear" indicated that an aircraft, designated Corktip, was down at specified coordinates. Armed with this information, he hustled a few yards to the Club dining room where he knew Base Manager Ben Moore was lunching with General Moore. Informed of the confusing situation, the general became quite agitated, hissing, *"The bastards have already started."*

The CPH and general walked to the radio room where, over time, they pieced together a more complete picture of the current situation. Moore's previous request to use American assets for Lao SARs was still in the mill. Therefore, while Wayne attempted to mount a rotary wing effort, the commanding officer called General Jacob E. Smart, CIC, Pacific Air Forces, and Admiral Felt, who authorized USAF assets to assist in the downed Navy pilot rescue attempt. The phone he used was a crank

¹² Earl Tilford, 48.

military field type, and Wayne was amazed at how much Moore accomplished over the simple instrument.

Since the commencement of reconnaissance photo missions, the President, Secretary of Defense, and the Joint Chiefs all shared a keen interest in Lao Yankee Team missions. Tough-minded General Curtis Lemay, U.S. Air Force Chief of Staff, examined existing arrangements for the use of Thailand-based planes for SAR efforts. However, it was a very sensitive issue, and was tabled. The matter came to a head when Ambassador Graham Martin learned of the aircraft downing within an hour of the occurrence. On advice from his AIRA advisor, Colonel McCoskrie, soon afterward, Martin phoned Air Marshal Dawee, explained the situation, and requested the RTG to allow American aircraft to launch into Laos from RTAF bases. At that time, the Thai leader officially granted USG military permission to use Thai-based American aircraft to support SAR operations in Laos, although he requested that the government be informed of ensuing actions.

Shortly after the dismal SAR performance, in correspondence to Dean Rusk, Ambassador Martin reflected an obvious requirement: to plan future search and rescue operations well in advance, and to effect them in a timely manner.¹³

Once cleared to utilize every air asset within his inventory, the Saigon air boss authorized Waterpump to launch Tangos flown by Air Commando instructor pilots.

Then the general phoned Takhli's duty officer to dispatch five F-100s toward Udorn. He further instructed that the pilots radio him when overhead Udorn, and not proceed any further without specific clearance. Then he informed Wayne that he might be instigating some dangerous precedents that might not be

¹³ Earl Tilford, 50.
Victor Anthony, 110.

politically correct. When the F-100s checked in, Moore directed them into Laos without hesitation. Then he turned to Wayne and said, "Here we go. *I hope we are doing the right thing.*"

The helicopters still had not entered the target area at this time, and Wayne was unsure of what the jets accomplished. He believed their impact was mostly symbolic. They made numerous radio calls close to "in the clear," which caused Wayne to speculate that the situation was probably compromised. In addition to the Takhli jets, Admiral Bringle ordered four F-8Us from the Kitty Hawk and two A-1Hs (call sign Sandy) launched from Da Nang.

In Vientiane, AIRA Commanding Officer, Colonel Tyrell, issued three requests to the ambassador for U.S. pilots to be launched, and provide T-28 close air support for the H-34s. However, everything was done too-little-too-late. By the time authorization was finally granted, crews rounded up, and the ships launched, both rescue helicopters had been damaged by groundfire, and Klusmann was a prisoner. ¹⁴

The first two T-28 pilots departed Wattay Airport about four o'clock, slightly behind the Waterpump pilots. Another set of T-28 pilots launched an hour later, but lacking contact with the downed pilot, and with the weather deteriorating quickly, Admiral Felt ordered the mission aborted. He subsequently indicated that future SAR operations in Laos would include only nonmilitary assets.

General Moore was closeted with Wayne for more than four hours, and there were lapses in between the action when the two men conducted meaningful discussions. During this period, the CPH developed a high respect for Moore. The general ruefully admitted deficiencies in the operation. He was unaware of the

¹⁴ CHECO.

previous Navy reconnaissance missions, and was highly miffed at not being advised in advance. ¹⁵

Ben Moore, aware that he would only get in the way if he became directly involved, wisely remained clear of the office during the unfolding episode. He acted in a similar manner during all future emergencies, aware that soon afterward Wayne would report pertinent details to him.

In later years, Wayne humorously reflected to the Author that during the SAR there was probably as much chaos in his office and the radio room as on the Plain of Jars. Moreover, right from the beginning, he harbored reservations regarding the outcome of the SAR when he realized that Moher and Cook, not considered his strongest pilots, were the two PICs involved. Tom Moher was a good friend, but Wayne was aware that he lacked the proper temperament and motivation to fly hazardous missions in Laos, much less generate the intestinal fortitude required for a hairy SAR situation. His disparaging comment regarding Cook's ability and attitude remains one for the reader to imagine. ¹⁶

Throughout the long ordeal, Wayne was very embarrassed, and more than a little shamed, by the long interval before launching the H-34s from Bouam Long. Udorn monitored the situation on UHF frequency and relayed information and instructions on VHF. Moore patiently witnessed all Wayne's radio calls, but interjected nothing. During the long delay, Knight began looking all over

¹⁵ This is difficult for the Author to fathom. There must have been an abundance of high-level message traffic between the USS Kitty Hawk, CINCPAC, and USAFPAC since the inception of reconnaissance missions over the Plain of Jars, and General Moore must have been in the loop.

¹⁶ The reader should remember that Wayne Knight was previously a H-34 line pilot and knew all his pilots' limitations and performance levels long before becoming CPH.

the country for the few available alternates. Dick Elder was one possibility.^{17 18}

THE RESCUE ATTEMPT

The three inbound aircraft radioed upon entering the target area. Tom Jenny established contact with Tom Moher and briefed him on the pilot's general location. Then, flying at low level, he went on ahead to make a marking pass by rocking his wings over the spot. During the maneuver, Jenny encountered heavy ground fire and received several minor hits. Pulling away from the area, he headed toward Sam Tong. At the same time, he informed Moher that the immediate vicinity was extremely hot, and recommended that he not attempt a rescue and to leave the area.

Circling during a reconnaissance to obtain site orientation and better assess Jenny's cautionary statement, Moher radioed that he believed he had spotted a man dressed in a flight suit and Mae West waving at him.

Meanwhile, the big bird pilots, anxious for an immediate pickup attempt, and unaware of the unfolding drama below, yelled at the helicopter pilots, charging that they were chicken sierra.¹⁹ Frustrated over the delay, and seeing the helicopters circling, a Caribou pilot indicated that he was going to show the H-34 pilots where the pilot was by marking the position with

¹⁷ EW Knight Emails, 05/01/00, 05/03/00, 05/07/00, 05/13/00, 06/24/00.
Victor Anthony, 110.

¹⁸ What actually occurred during the SAR attempt is necessarily muddled by time, diverse "eyewitness" accounts, and recollections of aging participants. Although puzzled by a few discrepancies described in the incident, the Author has attempted to portray a valid and reliable story, as close to the actual facts and as true a situation as possible.

¹⁹ Chicken Sierra: Expletive slang challenging a person's courage.

a smoke flare. He commenced a steep dive, while his crew began shooting from every open port and dropping hand grenades. At fifty feet he pulled up close to the deck near Klusmann. It was then that the C-7 pilot received his comeuppance, yelling about receiving ground fire and taking hits. During the process, the aircraft was impacted by a rifle grenade or similar weapon that created a large hole in the fuselage, a void one kicker described as large enough to pass a football through. The episode became very exciting for Klusmann, and highly personal when three grenades exploded nearby.

Terry Burke failed to raise Moher on the radio. He then contacted Bill Cook on VHF indicating that they planned to make a run into the area. Because of what had happened to the Caribou, Burke suspected an enemy trap. He had Smith relay for Cook to temporarily hold. Then he and his Helio Courier pilot conducted a fast pass over the pilot without taking hits. They observed a man in waist-high grass below a wooded ridgeline appearing to wave them off. Believing that scattered enemy held their fire to attack the slower helicopters, Terry told Cook to make a high speed pass by the pilot before attempting any hover. Cook hesitated.

Hearing Burke's call, Tom Moher chose not to answer. Instead, he elected to continue, determined to attempt a rescue. After rolling out wings level, he commenced an approach straight toward the target area with Cook in trail. Paralleling an east-west ridgeline, with less than a quarter mile before landing, gunfire erupted from the surrounding hills. The helicopters were so close to the ridges that Cook could see Pathet Lao clad in black pajamas shooting at them. Both ships were hit by small arms fire, but Moher's more severely (later reported to be eighty-three holes).

From the Helio, Burke observed Moher's H-34 trailing smoke that spiraled upward, while the ship plunged between two ridgelines toward the bottom of a ravine. ²⁰ Then the H-34 pulled out of the dive at the last moment with little room to spare.

The scene was total chaos in Tom Moher's cockpit. Savaged by enemy fire, Moher lost most pitch control when a round hit Thai PARU Captain Pichit high in the forehead. Bleeding profusely, Pichit slumped over the dual cyclic control system. With blood and skull chips splattering throughout the cockpit and on the windscreen, and with the pilot screaming at the top of his lungs, Moher unsuccessfully attempted to reverse the cyclic and pull out of the dive. Moments away from ground contact, Pichit miraculously regained consciousness, leaned back, and casually locked his shoulder harness. Despite a bloody gash in his head, the genial captain lifted his hand in a thumbs-up gesture, then once more lapsed into unconsciousness. Relieved of Pichit's restricting burden, Moher regained cyclic control, staggered slowly to altitude, and turned north still trailing smoke.

Klusmann observed Moher's H-34 approaching over a ridgeline from the west. He estimated the ship was a quarter mile away when the whole mountain appeared to erupt in gunfire. The fusillade was so intense that Chuck was struck by bark shards from a pine tree being whittled down by automatic fire. Despairing of rescue, he began waving the helicopter off, when suddenly the machine began weaving around the sky. Unaware that Moher was attempting to control the aircraft and depart, Chuck thought this was a very clever maneuver to draw the bad guys away from his position. ²¹

²⁰ The smoke came from damaged radio equipment located in the electronics compartment.

²¹ Chuck Klusmann Interview, 04/03/98.

Burke observed the heavy fire and the obvious H-34 battle damage inflicted on Moher's ship. He harbored a sinking feeling that any slim to nonexistent opportunity to extract the pilot by helicopter was finished. He made this statement over the air, but Cook, reasoning that with time conditions would only become worse, elected to remain in the area and attempt a quick rescue. Unaware that Moher's primary radio had been damaged, or of his critical problems in the cockpit, Cook radioed Moher of his intentions and peeled off to the right. Descending, he wound up on the east side of a north-south oriented ridgeline, and a little to the east of the area where he had seen the troops wearing the black pajamas. Thinking he was still in the vicinity of the downed pilot, and that he had not been seen, he landed. Then he and his flight mechanic peered anxiously from the helicopter anticipating a pilot emerging from trees lining both sides of the ridge. Receiving fire especially close to the cockpit, Cook asked his partner if he saw anyone coming. Receiving a negative from below, he performed a jump-takeoff, diving down the side of the hill. After takeoff, the automatic stabilization equipment (ASE) malfunctioned, causing the aircraft to bounce laterally left and right. He punched the ASE button off and the bouncing ceased, but the machine failed to fly well. Aware that he had sustained extensive battle damage, he imagined the worst: that essential components had been hit, and he had better place as much distance as possible between himself and the bad guys before being committed to a forced landing. Therefore, he set off in the same direction as Moher, without ever joining up with

him, and recovered at Houei Sa An (LS-23).^{22 23}

EVENTS ON THE GROUND

After waving off the helicopter, Klusmann began working his way slowly up the hill toward a tree line. Seeing the first enemy troops, he ducked into bushes, but was spotted. Heavily armed, toting Browning automatic rifles (BAR), Soviet Kalashnikov, AK-47s, and Burp guns, a squad surged up the hill and surrounded him. One man carried his helmet and parachute. Someone else had retrieved the activated beeper from the seat pan.

Klusmann's arms were secured, a noose looped around his neck, and he was thoroughly searched. They moved out up the hill, but it soon became apparent that their captive was injured. One of the soldiers fashioned a crude crutch. Chuck's hands were untied, and with him setting the pace, they continued the climb. One Pathet Lao soldier led the way, two others walked by his side to stabilize him, and the others brought up the rear.²⁴

Klusmann's initial treatment was good. After forty five minutes, the group stopped at a couple of huts, rested, and then continued to march. Within an hour, as night and light drizzle fell, they arrived at a larger encampment of six hooches. In one

²² Letter Written to Mike Marshall by Bill Cook and forwarded to the Author by Marshall on 05/27/99.

²³ Although this account of his participation during the Klusmann saga was written by Bill Cook years after the fact, because of Bill's well-known proclivity to distort facts and general lack of veracity, particularly when telling or retelling stories, much of this portion of the incident may not be valid and reliable. However, Cook himself admitted to hearing five different versions of the incident.

²⁴ Perhaps as an honorary award for their efforts that day, these same men served as his guards the entire time he was in captivity.

of the huts, Klusmann was searched again and offered a generous portion of rice, weeds, canned pork, boiled water, and tea. Then his benefactors provided him with a couple of blankets and directed him into the next room for the night. ²⁵

AFTERMATH

Captain Smith caught up with Moher's wounded H-34, and Burke helped retrace their path through the AAA gauntlet. The trip north was not pleasant. Everyone was terrified and felt horrible about leaving a fellow airman on the ground. Still hoping for a successful rescue, the big bird drivers shouted for a pickup. At the time they were unaware of what the helicopter crews had experienced in the shooting gallery, and the fact that they had to cross Route-7 and the dreaded Ban Ban Valley, with enemy gunners on full alert. ²⁶

After hearing the H-34s depart on the SAR mission, Dick Elder returned to Houa Moun, collected Pop Buell and "Jiggs" Weldon, and headed south to Site-88. They were about ten minutes from the site when Moher called on an unaffected radio saying he was inbound with a severely wounded PARU.

Smith and Moher landed at Bouam Long about the same time. A minute later, Dick Elder touched down. With Pichit wounded and Moher badly shaken, the situation was highly confused. After the unconscious Pichit was gently extracted from the cockpit, Weldon assessed his injury, a five inch, ugly grazing wound across the top of his skull. Doc administered an intravenous solution (IV) and applied a bandage. Following Doc's ministrations, the captain soon looked better, but was still unconscious. A STOL

²⁵ Lao Country Files, Charles Klusmann's Account, LBJ Library Austin, Texas.

²⁶ Terry Burke Email, 02/20/04.

plane soon arrived and Pichit was ferried to the Udorn military hospital in the Thai Army compound next to the Air America facility. ²⁷

With his aircraft too low on fuel to ferry south, Cook was retrieved and returned to Udorn.

Following the unnerving episode, Moher had no desire to board another aircraft, and spent a boozy night at Bouam Long. He was afforded a decent interval to recover his equilibrium, but was never thrilled at being assigned upcountry work again. In January 1965, he opted for a less challenging job in Bangkok.

Burke returned to Long Tieng in the Helio Courier and was never debriefed about the SAR attempt. He later spoke with Cook about the incident, and learned that both Cook and Moher had received a lot of criticism for not landing at the downed pilot site. He was puzzled by this, for he had been the one who initially held them back and then advised a rapid flyby to see what would happen. He was reasonably certain that if either one had landed, they never would have been able to takeoff. In his mind, the men had already displayed their courage by flying across the most heavily defended enemy area in Laos in the low flying, slow flying, unarmed H-34s. ²⁸

Sometime later, while drinking in the Club bar, John Wiren loudly and verbally blamed Cook for departing the scene and not extracting the downed pilot. Mike Marshall defended his friend Cook saying, "*You do not know what you are talking about.*" Wiren, a well-built former athlete took exception to Mike's statement, saying, "*I am going to kick your ass.*" He invited the

²⁷ Captain Pichit survived his wounds, but later died of acute alcoholism.

²⁸ Terry Burke.
Bill Leary 1964 Notes.

rangy Texan outside to engage in fisticuffs. Mike, although well lubricated, was far too intelligent to tangle with John. ²⁹

Whatever other implications surfaced or were expressed, Air America's initial SAR for the U.S. military had been horribly botched by excessive secrecy, delay, and a lack of timely coordination. With no formal SAR training and few guidelines to follow, any successful outcome was doomed from the beginning. Considering the time honored U.S. military muddle through philosophy, we had nearly lost two helicopters, their crews, and incurred battle damage to several other aircraft. Rightly or wrongly, the event failed to instill U.S. military leaders' confidence in the ability of our helicopter group to perform this demanding kind of work. It also caused dissent and recrimination within members of our own ranks, who firmly believed that the two pilots involved did not respond to the situation in a timely manner. If a civilian SAR program was going to succeed, it was obvious that changes had to be made and firm SOPs established on all command levels.

²⁹ Mike Marshall Tape-Laos 1962-1964.

Just prior to sunset, with all Air America helicopter assets having departed the scene, no further sighting of the pilot, and weather deteriorating, the SAR was terminated for the day. Anticipating a continuing SAR, Wayne immediately began scheduling fresh relief pilots upcountry to crew the few airworthy and undamaged H-34s. With rumors abounding and speculation about the health of our ill-fated SAR pilots growing, I was alerted for duty late in the day and deadheaded to Wattay Airport in a Caribou with PIC Bob La Turner. I did not notice any battle damage, so he must have switched to another ship. With operations shut down for the night, I proceeded no further than Vientiane that evening.

Following a night in the Gray House, the next morning I deadheaded to Long Tieng with Charlie Weitz in Hotel-15. In addition to spare parts, a load of maintenance people were on board, equipped to assess and repair the battle damaged ships for ferry to Udorn or return to field service.

Because of the diminished pilot force, a double crew policy for SARs, although probably acknowledged as realistic, was not yet implemented. The process was far too early in the SAR phase of our operations to be established as a necessary requirement. We also had too few pilots to cover such a prerequisite. The policy would not be initiated until later, when an expanded crew force to enhance crew safety in extra hazardous situations made the two men in the cockpit SOP mandatory for SAR missions. Two pilots in the cockpit during SAR situations was an excellent concept. Should one pilot become incapacitated, or subject to what Tom Moher experienced, at least in theory, the other qualified pilot could assume control of the ship. However, at

this time there was a logical Customer restriction to such an arrangement: adequate funding to hire personnel.

The Lao project, already operating on a tight budgetary shoestring, did not allow sufficient funds to hire additional helicopter personnel, much less pay for two pilots in the cockpit. Recent cutbacks in funding had been implemented in every quarter to save money. Indeed, existing policy specified that if not functioning as a rare co-Captain on a helicopter, a pilot received no deadhead pay. Like removing five minutes project pay for recorded takeoff and landing legs, it was just another means for the Customer to marshal funds. We were still logging fuel legs or shutdowns, so the reduced time did not greatly influence our pay. It amounted to generally less than ten dollars on a good day. Logging every single landing and takeoff would have required a personal secretary in the cockpit. Moreover, depending on what our missions dictated, these landings and departures might total a hundred or more sorties during a ten-hour period, and after five-minute deductions, there would have been little or no extra pay for the crews. Such an absurd policy would have certainly squelched any incentive to go the extra mile, and we might have ended a day owing the Company store. The helicopter was unique compared to a fixed wing aircraft. Rotating rotor blades created lift, and officially connoted legal flight time. As lagniappe, and to balance the deducted time, we logged the first rotor turn up to rotor shut down (also called chock to chock). This included loading and taxiing prior to takeoff. The admonition to "keep the rotors turning" was apt, and always paramount in our minds.

After reaching Site-20A from a nonentity slug, I became an instant full-fledged co-Captain, subordinate to the senior Weitz. We took on some juice, a weapon, and launched for Phou

Vieng, where I would join Captain Dick Elder in Hotel-13 to participate in the new war.

Heading north toward Moung Soui (L-108) and Phou So (LS-57) at 8,000 feet, we approached Ban Nam Pit. For safety, the village population had relocated to a 4,300-foot pinnacle type mesa, whose sheer sides flowed down toward the Nam Ngum's south bank. A trench line surrounded the village perimeter. Just across the river lay Houei Ki Nin (LS-38). To the west San Luang (LS-41) was located, and then Xieng Dat (LS-26) in the distance. All the areas contained diverse and mixed cultures of lowlanders and highlanders, of which the enemy frequently took advantage. Forming a portion of Vang Pao's northern flank, I had serviced both highlander sites in the past for USAID.

While Charlie cruised past the eastern side of the site, I momentarily glanced down and observed a series of coordinated winking lights emanating from all quadrants of the village perimeter. At first, I envisioned playful kids flashing mirrors or white shiny objects at us, but there were too many intermittent glints to be random flashes. I was surprised when I realized that people in the supposedly friendly village were definitely shooting at us. I suspected this sort of thing had been occurring for years, but this marked the first time I actually observed copious and sustained ground fire. It would not be the last.

Because of our altitude, we were well beyond the range of small arms fire, and passed the danger zone without incident. Charlie, who always flew in the right seat, had not observed the ground fire, and seemed relatively unconcerned when I alerted him to it. From his position by the cargo door looking north and east, "C" Decosta was unable to observe anything either. Unable to retaliate at the moment, I was highly incensed and mentally vowed revenge on the bastards.

Apparently, with the recent escalation, the war had assumed a new phase that emboldened enemy action. According to intelligence reports, enemy patrols had always filtered easily and unscathed through the area. While flying over the region in the past, I wondered why there had not been more ground fire incidents. In my confused world regarding the war, I naively and illogically half-believed that the Agency paid the right people to leave us to our pursuits.

In our favor, with the advent of our T-28 program, and proper backing, we now possessed the means to engage the enemy. However, because the T-28 program was new, still closely monitored, and tightly controlled by embassy personnel, we lacked sufficient resources and authorization to react in a timely manner. Believing that we could not allow such blatant shooting to go unpunished, I began planning a personal retaliation.

After reaching Phou Vieng, I switched to Hotel-13 with Dick Elder and "Blackie" Mondello, who had both been standing by at Houei Sa An. While Charlie continued on to Bouam Long with mechanics to repair Moher's ship, we departed for Long Tieng.

Since the beginning of American military air activity on the Plain of Jars and southern Laos in May, we had never been apprised of a need for any increased SAR requirement. However, it was something we had always performed on a causal catch as catch can basis for our own Company, Bird, and the few Lao T-28 aviators venturing north. Therefore, because we knew the area well, and were the only assets available in country, crewmember rescue was natural for us, and we unknowingly slipped into a phantom de facto SAR role. If our leaders knew anything more initially, they divulged nothing. We were simply pre-positioned to areas where it would be easy to dispatch a helicopter to a downing site. The entire program was still highly classified and

in flux, so no information was passed to us rank and file types in the field. We could only surmise what was occurring.

Unknown to Dick Elder, Alpha pilots Tom Jenny and John Wiren had attacked the immediate area where Chuck Klusmann was observed the previous day. Although not observing activity in the area, employing Willy Pete (white phosphorous) and fragmentation bombs, they left several shacks burning in a small village. ¹

BEGINNING OF A FUN TIME

Klusmann did not sleep well during his first night in captivity. His guards awakened him early and provided rice, weeds, and pork for breakfast. As if expecting trouble, they ushered him into a cave 200 yards from the main camp and offered him a blanket and canvas for cover. Warmer in the cave, he was able to sleep for two hours. He awoke to explosions and noise. Unknown to his relatively unsophisticated Pathet Lao guards, from altitude, military planes had tracked his progress by homing on the still activated beeper signal. This information was coordinated in Vientiane and perpetrated a T-28 attack on the camp. ² The strike inflicted little damage and elicited even less concern by his guards.

Later they departed for another camp. Aided by crude walking sticks, Chuck's guards allowed him to set a slow pace. In this manner, they moved down the mountain, across a stream, and up the side of another mountain. During the trip, he saw a number of planes pass overhead. None saw the group, as they moved into bushes whenever aircraft were present.

¹ Tom Jenny Email.

² With continuous use, an emergency locator transmitter (ELT) battery generally lasted twenty-four-hours.

They reached their destination about dark. The larger village was located in a small bowl-shaped valley. People who met the group were dressed in civilian clothes. Klusmann was allowed to wash and then eat in a hut.

All previous conversation had been accomplished by either sign language or a guide book that formed part of his survival equipment. Then one of his captors, presumably an officer, entered the hut and inquired if Chuck spoke English. Limited himself in English, they began writing questions and answers. Chuck wrote down his name, rank, and serial number. When asked other questions about his family, planes he flew, and such, he wrote that he was not allowed to answer these. Finally, the man departed. ³

CONTINUE TO MARCH

Despite Klusmann's untimely downing, during a National Security Council meeting the previous day, Secretary McNamara wanted the Plain of Jars reconnaissance operation continued to display USG resolve. However, this time the planes would be accompanied by fighter-bombers with the option to counter any ground fire. Some military leaders attending the meeting wanted to hit AAA sites prior to reconnaissance missions, while other cautious principals opted to wait for enemy provocation. Secretary Rusk, who firmly believed reconnaissance flights a strong deterrent to enemy operations, agreed that the flights should continue. ⁴

³ Chuck Klusmann, Military Debriefing.
Chuck Klusmann, *The Price of Freedom*, 12/27/97.
Chuck Klusmann Interview at the Author's House, 04/03/98.

⁴ NSC Meeting-1045, 06/06/64.

A telegram to the ambassador explained the decision to continue Plain of Jars reconnaissance and requested that Unger explain to Souvanna Phouma the urgent requirement of such a mission to offset the psychological effect of the jet downing. There was hope that the escorted missions would not be discovered by the enemy for a few days. Future flights would be reviewed and conducted at the request of the RLG.

Souvanna agreed to the escorts, but requested the information be kept quiet. ⁵

With civilian leaders' approval, the Joint Chiefs of Staff directed CINCPAC to prepare to fly two low-level Plain of Jars reconnaissance sorties as a single flight. Eight fighter-bombers would act as escort with ordnance tailored for AAA suppression should retaliatory fire be required. Although preparing to rotate to the States, the Kitty Hawk would provide assets for the mission. To afford a modicum of safety, Khang Khay and Xieng Khouang were to be avoided. ⁶

East of Moung Soui at Phou Khout, with Neutralist forces holding north and west slopes, and enemy units the east, the crest remained unoccupied. Lao T-28 pilots attempted to bomb enemy positions on the east side between Routes-71, 7, and the connecting feeder road. ⁷

About 1400 hours, while en route to Long Tieng to offload Elder, we were surprised by a Mayday-Mayday call over UHF guard frequency. The distress signal was a harbinger of doom, which triggered a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. With an aviator in trouble, normal work immediately ceased, and all

⁵ Telegram State to Vientiane.
Victor Anthony, 111.

⁶ AMEMB Vientiane-1721.

⁷ Leonard Unger Situation Report, 06/08/64.

available crews participated in the rescue attempt. Few if any pilots had to be coaxed to help; most were eager and willing to place their lives on the line for another aviator, regardless of his nationality. Because the coordinates were reported in the Ban Ban area, we turned 180 degrees and returned to Site-23.

Unknown to us, escorted by four F8Ds, a reconnaissance RF-8A had entered the Plain of Jars area. The planes flew high over the target. When AAA fire flooded the sky, one plane was hit. Cleared for action, armed jets struck enemy positions with ineffective Sidewinder air-to-air missiles. Then all returned to the USS *Kitty Hawk* in the Tonkin Gulf.

A second flight soon followed. Lieutenant Commander Doyle W. Lynn, VF-111 Executive Officer, was flying a F8D. He escorted a RF8A reconnaissance plane supposedly in the same area as the Lieutenant Klusmann incident. During a second pass, his plane was disabled by AAA fire. Lynn's wingman, remaining in the area until bingo status, observed Old Nick 110's parachute opening and passed the coordinates to Colonel Jack Catlin's Air Support Operations Center at Udorn. Catlin's people in turn forwarded the information to the Air Operations Center in Vientiane and to Detachment-3 Pacific Air Rescue Center at Tan Son Nhut, Vietnam. Admiral Felt immediately rescinded his brief restriction on using military planes for SAR. The carrier task group commander dispatched additional Crusaders and an A-3B communications aircraft packed with electronic gear to Laos. Refueling tankers were sent to keep the F-8s aloft. A flight of four Douglas A-1H Skyraiders arrived from Da Nang to cover the inbound UH-34D crews.⁸

⁸ The U.S. Navy nickname for these planes was Spad. They were later genetically designated A-1E with a Sandy call sign for SAR missions.

Heeding the call from the ambassador, Air America aircraft, including T-28 Alphas and Waterpump pilots, also responded to the SAR. Detachment-6 Commanding Officer Barney Cochran departed Udorn in T-28s with three Air America pilots. The task involved searching a three mile area along both sides of the reported location. A fruitless search was conducted, after which ordnance was deposited on suspected AAA batteries on the northeastern portion of the Plain. Cochran himself dropped two 500 pound bombs on a 37mm gun site near Xieng Khouang Ville. Ambassador Unger was not pleased when he learned of Cochran's participation.

Sanctioned to fly support for the downed Navy pilots, directed by Agency Case Officers in cargo planes, civilian Alpha pilots continued to strike enemy positions for two days.⁹

After nothing tangible developed in the original reported downing area, we were directed by Vientiane to Ban Na to shut down and wait at the radio station for additional word while military and Air America planes conducted a visual and electronic search of the entire area. Because of a lack of range, and to conserve precious fuel, it was deemed more economical and far safer to have high speed planes discover a pilot's location, and then call in helicopters for an extraction. Actually, we were still not sure of Klusmann's disposition and there were now two searches in progress. The stand-by interlude at Ban Na marked the beginning of a SAR norm for several months during future Plain of Jars reconnaissance and strike missions.

⁹ Segment Sources:
Earl Tilford, 49.
Edward Marolda, Fitzgerald, 385.
Victor Anthony, 111.
Joe Leeker, Air America in Laos: Humanitarian Work, 45.
Bill Leary 1964 Notes, UTD.

Later in the day, I returned to Long Tieng, and dropped Elder off to catch a ride home, where he would attend to pressing Club duties. Then I refueled, and with Chris Crisologo replacing Mondello, returned to the search mode. Before departing, I discussed with Tony Poe the incident at Nam Pit that morning, and strongly emphasized that the episode required counter action to prevent future indiscriminate shootings. The large man agreed, but as current SAR operations took priority with all available assets, deferred any action until the following day.

After a weak homing beacon signal was received by orbiting Caribous, I spent two hours aloft searching the mountains south of the Plain of Jars, where emphasis focused after discovering that the initial report of the F-8 downing location was completely wrong. ¹⁰

During the dark period of impromptu Lao SAR operations, the right hand rarely knew what the left was doing. Apparently, the U.S. Navy used a homing transmitter (ELT) that emitted an undulating signal in a frequency different from the Air Force. ¹¹ Besides the H-34, the Caribou ¹² was the only Air America fixed wing equipped with UHF receivers. Consequently, after triangulation, it was not until almost dark that the Navy pilot's location was narrowed to an area southeast of Ban Na. Relieved, we believed that the area was in no man's land, although we were not certain, as it was assumed that bands of

¹⁰ This marked the first of many incorrect military reports from airborne aircraft relating to positions of aviators or other items on the ground. Therefore, I took any reported Air Force set of coordinates with a grain of salt, and over the years developed a thumb rule of the reports always being "forty miles in error."

¹¹ Despite this difference, all standard emergency frequencies were preset to UHF-243.0; VHF-121.5.

¹² The plane's call sign, exclusively reserved for SARs, initially became Victor Control.

Pathet Lao still roamed everywhere after the fall of the Plain of Jars, and I had observed hostile action the previous day from a friendly village.

In the short time Captains Howard Estes, Charlie Weitz, and I searched for the pilot, I marveled at the decaying cornfields lying on fertile ledges or up draws in remote, and seemingly uninhabited areas, I had never previously flown low over. Apparently, there were no enemy forces in the area, as no one reported ground fire. Finally, the operation was terminated for the day because of low clouds and a dark cloak of night rapidly descending upon us. Recalling my hairy night flight and RON in the weeds, I was pleased to leave the hostile terrain for the "comfort" of Long Tieng.

Given what little we had gathered about the situation, if the pilot was still on the ground there, we were confident of a successful recovery the following morning. All that was needed was a little fine-tuning during the final search and extraction phase. However, with the Murphy principle always an underlying factor, particularly in aviation, we were not completely naïve, and were keenly aware that variables and intangibles could crop up at a most inopportune time.

In order to be available for a coordinated first light launch on the eighth, all three crews RON'd in the Long Tieng operations shack. The excess number of bodies and their requirements sorely taxed the limited resources of the facility. However, the PARU boys and Tony did their utmost to accommodate us with food and cots. Even following a couple of soothing beers, there was little idle chatter. Contributing to our uneasiness and considerable nervous tension was the excitement generated over the following morning's projected SAR. Consequently, I found it particularly difficult to sleep that night. This was not unusual, for I often encountered delayed and

fitful sleep patterns while unwinding and reliving the stress of a day's events, and anticipation of the next day's task. Finally, after my psychological demons faded into the recesses of my mind, I drifted off into a troubled sleep.

Returning to Udorn in his T-28 not long after the SAR was called off, Barney Cochrane approached Ben Moore and Wayne Knight with a top secret twix indicating that a high-ranking "Anchor Clanker" was arriving that night. Barney considered the party might be CINCPAC himself. Because of this possibility, the two honchos decided to await the man's arrival.

Dick Elder, Jack Connor, and a couple of others lingering at the Club, learned about the impending arrival of the dignitary on an RB-57. They waited and waited, while Wayne hung around the pool drinking beer with the guys. Finally, Ben retired, with instructions to wake him when the individual arrived.

Sometime after midnight, a plane landed and Wayne drove the Company Jeep to the terminal. A "kid," looking so young, that the CPH thought he must be a military dependent, climbed from the rear seat. He was Lynn's wingman, an ensign, dispatched from the ship to help pin-point his leader. In the end, the exercise was deemed an exercise in futility, for he was the same individual who initially radioed the erroneous coordinates. Like most high-flying jet jockeys, the ensign was totally disoriented while attempting to determine a definitive plot on the 1:250,000 wall map. It amounted to a wasted effort, for the pilot's approximate position had already been established. After a long, frustrating two days of attempting to coordinate crews and aircraft for missions, Wayne was not pleased with this latest

development or the lost sleep. Moore was even less thrilled with Cochrane's phantom "Anchor Clanker" and let him know about it. ¹³

SUCCESS

Low clouds and fog hung on the hills in the Ban Na area the following morning, when a Caribou assigned to the SAR mission received a strong signal from the downed pilot. Ready and waiting before the break of dawn, we launched and flew over Sam Tong, and then threaded our way under the overcast along the valley leading to Site-15. After passing the site, using directions relayed by the C-7 PIC, we fanned out and began a comprehensive search. Heavily forested terrain amid high and low clouds created a sense of claustrophobia, like flying inside a restricted box. I thought the partially obscured mountaintops might delay our mission. As during the previous day, the ridge I slowly hovered along contained a disused cornfield. With not a soul in sight, I wondered who had walked there, and from where, to tend the field.

Our H-34s were originally designed by Sikorsky factory engineers to fulfill U.S. Navy shipboard operations at sea level. When originally conceived on the drawing board, the off-the-shelf R-1820 engine was never intended to provide sufficient power to hover out of ground effect (OGE) at extreme altitudes in high density altitude conditions such as we encountered in Laos. ¹⁴ Still, we found a way to accomplish our missions by limiting our internal cabin and fuel loads. In addition, at critical times we further reduced weight by leaving tool kits,

¹³ EW Knight, Email, 05/06/00.

¹⁴ OGE: This was a hovering condition, generally above five feet, whereby, there was little or no ground cushion to aid lift and require less power. The condition could also result from high winds that eliminated a sustained ground cushion.

RON gear, and other sundry gear at the base. Although not according to Company policy, some pilots occasionally left their Flight Mechanics behind to accomplish a job. Of course, despite all our attempts to reduce weight, individual pilot technique became the ultimate gauge of success during high altitude work.

Proceeding carefully at very low speed, Crisologo and I scanned the immediate area for any sign of a human. Then Howard, who was hovering with difficulty on the east side of the hill at 4,800 feet, in a nervous staccato voice, excitedly announced he had just observed a flare and spotted a pilot. With the advent of a live pilot in sight, our hearts pounded and the anticipation of a rescue peaked. Suddenly bad news surfaced. During a running monologue, in which Howard's impassioned voice ranged from normal to high pitched as conditions varied, he radioed that the man was down slope in the trees; it was going to be difficult, if not impossible, to extend the one hundred foot hoist cable to him. Still Estes tried, but discovering the cable a few feet too short, made adjustments and almost lost control of the helicopter. Listening to Howard's hairy state of affairs over FM, without being able to help, almost drove me crazy. All I could offer was moral support. Finally, after nearly crashing, Estes directed the pilot toward a small clearing where a successful extraction was effected. I was happy with Howard's rescue and my chance to participate in a small way. However, the jealous green monster surfaced in my mind, and I wished that I had been the one to have performed the rescue. ¹⁵

As an ersatz SAR unit, we had nearly redeemed ourselves from the previous day's abortion. However, we were still

¹⁵ Author Note: I had forgotten the adage of being very careful for what you wish for; events over the next twelve months provided many opportunities to achieve a note worthy status.

learning a relatively new vocation, and each emergency presented very different circumstances. This time we were considerably more coordinated in our mission and assets, and most importantly, no one shot at us. In this case, the only challenges to overcome were weather, terrain, and fear of the unknown.

Lynn was ferried to Udorn and then returned to his carrier-based squadron. Before departing, CPH Knight had the opportunity to chat with the commander who indicated that at one point he considered firing his .38 caliber pistol containing tracer bullets to mark his position. Wayne said that would not have been wise and might have caused doubt in the helicopter pilot's minds as to the area's security. ^{16 17 18 19}

AN INITIAL "ATTA BOY"

Written on 9 June, Ambassador Leonard Unger forwarded a commendation to Vientiane Base Manager Roy Stitt. It read in part:

"I have been asked to send you the texts of messages from the Chief of Naval Operation, Admiral Felt, Admiral Sharp, and Rear Admiral Bringle on the successful efforts in which you and your company participated to rescue one of the U.S. Navy pilots [Commander Lynn] recently shot down over Laos."

Admiral Felt:

¹⁶ EW Knight, Email.

¹⁷ Lynn went on to fly additional missions in the theater. On 27 May 1965, he perished while leading a flight on a AAA suppression mission over the Vinh, North Vietnamese railroad yards.

¹⁸ Bill Leary, 1964 Notes, UTD.

¹⁹ A 06/08/64 CIA Bulletin had the rescue conducted twenty miles southwest of Ban Tha Vieng (LS-13). This is not how we recalled the extraction location, but the Author has been unable to discover the exact coordinates.

"Your rescue of the downed pilot under very difficult circumstances from a hostile environment was a superb example of team work at its very best for which the Navy is most grateful. To all involved a 'hearty well done.'

Please extend my grateful appreciation to all hands involved for their untiring and successful efforts in pick-up of the downed F-8 pilot..."

Admiral Sharp:

"Please pass my deepest appreciation to those responsible for the successful rescue mission just completed."

Rear Admiral Bringle:

"The complete and rapid response followed by untiring efforts of all concerned in the successful rescue under adverse conditions is deeply appreciated and a great assurance to all pilots."

Leonard Unger:

"I would like to express my own sentiments of profound thanks and congratulations to you and through you to all Air America personnel who participated in the rescue mission." ²⁰

WASHINGTON

During a 4 June meeting, top Washington civilian and military leaders failed to consider the political implications of actual combat air operations in conjunction with reconnaissance missions or pre-strikes on AAA positions, especially not while high-level ICC negotiations were making progress in London and Moscow. However, events stemming from aircraft downings on the sixth and seventh revised this confused

²⁰ Letter from Ambassador Unger to Roy Stitt, 06/09/64. Although I never saw this particular commendation, it would be the first of many we did receive for our SAR work.

thinking. ²¹ Continued intelligence gathering from the Plain of Jars was critical to this stage of the war. Therefore, tangible retaliation was paramount to send a clear message to the communists that the U.S. reconnaissance program would continue. How, when, and where to strike became a prime subject for discussion.

Certainly enemy action should not go unpunished, and there was general agreement that adequate justification for air strikes on selected AAA positions existed. Some more hawkish leaders desired immediate strikes. As rationalization for reconnaissance missions, they cited Souvanna Phouma's request for critical reconnaissance data (of course, at Unger's urging), which evidenced that USG was not violating Lao sovereignty. Others reluctant to escalate the fighting urged caution, but at the same time curiously desired to reestablish a Neutralist presence on the Plain. There was also consideration given to addressing Pathet Lao-controlled territory in the Lao Panhandle that allowed free access to South Vietnam.

Proposals for strike missions were recommended for the eighth. A bevy of eight Air Force F-100s deployed from Clark Air Force Base, Philippines, would pre-stage out of the Tan Son Nhut base, South Vietnam, to conduct the mission. However, Department of Defense representatives requested a delay until the ninth. President Johnson sanctioned the mission but, concerned about the "muddle through mentality," wanted input on future plans. He also specified that escort aircraft precede the reconnaissance planes and strafe the area prior to the photo operations. With LBJ's approval, at the end of the day, the Joint Chiefs of Staff

²¹ However, it was noted with some satisfaction that 138 missions had been conducted throughout the country resulting in only two losses; using the safest route into and out of the target area would reduce any loss potential to a minimum.

alerted CINCPAC to prepare for a strike on AAA batteries in the vicinity of Xieng Khouang Ville.

In Unger's view, projected air strikes against AAA batteries in the Plain of Jars area would be a mistake. ²² Following recent aircraft losses and the obligatory press release revealing the downing on the seventh and the escort role, he felt the hard work of the past two years would be seriously impaired, particularly the Geneva Accords, and USG relations with the Prime Minister, and with western ICC representatives.

At the commencement of the reconnaissance flights, his agreement with Souvanna stipulated maintaining the utmost secrecy regarding U.S. military air activity. To cover any leftist accusations and eventualities of USG meddling on the PDJ, previous statements to the press stated that bombing in PL areas were conducted by Lao T-28 pilots. In a quandary, Unger requested additional guidance to reply to the press, Souvanna Phouma, and International Control Commission representatives, who were slated to visit Khang Khay on 10 June.

He wanted the timing and place of future military air actions to be tailored to correspond with political requirements. He further recommended recce flights be reduced and escort flights discontinued. As an alternative, reconnaissance could be performed by T-28 pilots staged out of Luang Prabang. In subsequent communication, Unger, despite his negativity regarding strikes on AAA sites, stated that he did not oppose all use of U.S. air in Laos. If Pathet Lao forces began a large offensive against Moung Soui or continued south

²² Remember the Ambassador had advisors and the Country Team from which to draw information and form conclusions.

from Tha Thom, and if the RLA forces could not contain them, he hoped Souvanna would request U.S. air support. ²³

We had little time to celebrate our first successful SAR mission. Sacrificing normal work, as per orders from the Vientiane Embassy, the rest of the day was programmed to search for the Navy pilot downed the previous day. This was projected to continue until the man was discovered, declared dead, or verified captured. Much to the chagrin of American workers at Long Tieng and Sam Tong, during a SAR, all normal work ceased. During such operations, Site-20A could not deliver ammunition or retrieve intelligence reports; nor could Site-20 forward supplies, retrieve the sick, or dispatch people to determine the situation within AID areas. This was an important facet to the entire operation, for, not readily acknowledged, Sam Tong produced an abundance of good intelligence from villagers.

In retrospect, a SAR search also functioned to flood the area with helicopters to cover projected air attacks on enemy anti-aircraft positions. New events were unfolding at such a rapid pace that bullets, beans, and bandages were no longer being distributed to field troops in a timely manner, but no one at Long Tieng or Sam Tong complained yet. That would have to await Vint Lawrence's return.

A LESSON AT NAM PIT

Even with the euphoria of a successful SAR under our belts, my enthusiasm to retaliate against the villagers of Nam Pit had

²³ Segment Sources:
Memorandum of NSC Meeting to the President, 06/07/64.
Memorandum for the Record from Secretary of Defense McNamara, 06/07/64.
Central Intelligence Director John A. McCone, 06/07/64.
CHECO; Unger to State, 1900, 06/08/64.
Victor Anthony, 112.

not diminished. I was very angry, had a personal vendetta to fulfill, and would not be satisfied until it was accomplished. Before embarking on the SAR, I had challenged Tony to make good on his promise to help me teach good manners to the wayward people at Nam Pit. As expected, the former Marine was true to his word. Now that the wraps were off in Military Region Two, what better time was there to strike? Because of the recent loss of the Plain of Jars and now with the downing of U.S. jet aircraft, the war had assumed a completely new aggressive phase, and the floodgates were opened for offensive measures. With no one at Long Tieng to restrain him, Poe provided me with a Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR) and several loaded twenty round magazines. The hard charger apologized for not accompanying me, but embassy regulations forbade Agency Case Officers from participating in combat missions (wink-wink). I was to hear this time and again, but noted that the man often went into contested places.

I liked the BAR for its reliable firepower. I had gained considerable experience with it while undergoing training at Quantico. During my early Marine Corps training, because of the high rate of fire and degree of reliability, the old weapon still formed the core fire power of the four-man fire team. Naturally, since I was the smallest member of my squad at Quantico, perverse drill instructors assigned me the heavy, bulky weapon. Within a short time, I learned its intricacies well, but never became used to toting the nineteen and a half pound weight, particularly during the infamous and dreaded five-mile hill trail runs. However, despite severe stitches in my side, I never fell out alongside the trail, like other larger specimens did.

Romeo Crisologo was a new man in our organization, and a relative unknown to me in performing crew chief tasks. However,

we had met earlier and, discovering we had common interests, I had taken an instant liking to him. Certainly, Chris's duties never included that of a shooter, but it was obvious that I could not fly and fire a weapon at the same time. Against this scenario, I briefed Chris about what happened at Nam Pit, and asked if he would act as my proxy and function as a gunner. He replied that he was familiar with the BAR and would participate. After Tony presented a brief refresher demonstration about how to load and fire the gun, we departed on the mission: blast the bastards.

I expected trouble, but when we arrived at the site, all appeared peaceful. No one shot at us or made threatening gestures. Instead, people casually walked around, kids played, and animals wandered at will. The location displayed a normal setting, one I always looked for while sizing up a site before landing. I was confused. *Was the previous incident only an illusion?* No, the event had actually occurred, and I was still upset, anxious to set an example so the incident would not happen again.

Descending to commence an attack, I alerted Chris to prepare for action. I calculated that grazing fire would have the desired effect to place rounds in the ville. Standing off a little so we would not be an easy target, I began right hand 360-degree orbits around the complex. At my command, Chris began firing. The staccato roar of his short measured bursts was deafening, filling every nook and cranny of the helicopter. From his unflawed performance, it appeared that my partner did actually possess experience with the versatile weapon. I loved it and exhorted him, "*To pour it into them.*" Like puppets dancing on a string, people jumped for the safety of prepared trenches encircling the village perimeter. There were no red tracers in the magazines with which to spot impact, and I was

not close enough to observe rounds actually smacking the ground or to attest to their accuracy, but the constant hammering of our solitary weapon and increased activity on the ground indicated that our efforts had some effect. While I circled the pinnacle three times, Chris only stopped firing to reload. Then, with all the magazines expended, my anger vented, and vengeance achieved, we returned to Long Tieng.

After relinquishing the BAR, and making a few comments about tearing up some ass, we were assigned an eastern sector to search for the first downed pilot. When possible, we linked up in flights of two for added safety.

Later in the day, while refueling at Long Tieng, Tony approached me with a serious face, inquiring about the morning's activity at Nam Pit. I briefly related our action and asked if there was a problem. He did not go into detail, but indicated that the village chief had radioed Long Tieng complaining, and wanting to know why one of our helicopters had shot up his village. He said there were many dead and wounded. This was confusing, and the situation had changed considerably. Now I worried that perhaps in the heat of battle I had screwed up royally and actually fired on a friendly village. When Vang Pao was informed, he certainly would be angry. Furthermore, when word of the incident arrived in the hands of the proper Vientiane authorities, the ambassador might order my termination. For the moment, Tony told me not to worry, but at this point in the equation, that was virtually impossible.

Another four-hour stint kept me away from Long Tieng until almost dark. During this period, I constantly thought about and considered the pros and cons of my attack on Nam Pit. I still felt entirely justified in the action, and my intent had been to intimidate the people, so they would never again be tempted to shoot at a helicopter. Furthermore, as ludicrous as it sounds, I

never intended to actually kill anyone. When I returned, I took Tony aside and quietly inquired about the validity of the reported dead and wounded. Relatively unconcerned, he indicated that the first report was wrong. No one had been hurt. When I probed for more information, he speculated that when the villagers heard a Pathet Lao patrol was coming, they fled off the hill into the jungle. Fearing Vang Pao's terrible wrath, they had not reported the Pathet Lao incursion. That explanation sounded a little weak to me, but I accepted it, and no more was said. To the best of my knowledge, I was never implicated, and if Wayne or AB-1 heard anything, they never queried me.

I attempted to forget the episode, but it was difficult, for I frequently rubbed elbows with the village chief in the long house across the runway during VP's all hands dinners. At such times, I encountered a rush of embarrassment, wondering if the short, piggish looking individual was aware that I was the person who had shot up his ville.

The "rest of the story" (a la radio broadcaster Paul Harvey) was not revealed for many years. Without mentioning me as a principal in the incident, Tony assumed full blame for sanctioning the attack. As the village chief was a Vang Pao appointee and relative by marriage, the general was initially quite angry. After the fact, Poe received a severe reprimand from Bill Lair, Pat Landry, and the Chief of Station Bangkok. However, with an ability to eradicate painful experiences that constituted personal affronts, he shrugged off the scolding. ²⁴

²⁴ Author's Note: For years, there was doubt in my mind if I had actually injured anyone that day. I asked Tony in a letter if he recalled the incident, and if I had really hurt anyone. I am not sure he remembered, for he seemed noncommittal and indicated that if it involved Vang Pao's people, there was no great loss.

All American workers in the area were aware of the incident and were quite concerned. Nam Pit was essentially a Lao Theung village, reputed to contain Pathet Lao sympathizers. Pop, always ready to stir the pot, wanted to make an issue of the shooting, until the Agency cautioned that if he did, they all might lose critical air support. He consequently backed off, as did Vang Pao, and all other people involved in the program. The official explanation forwarded to Vientiane and Udorn indicated that the H-34 had been shot at and the crew returned counter fire.

Because of increasing military air activity and other more important requirements, Ambassador Unger had vastly more pressing duties with which to deal than some vague upcountry incident. Even though he was well aware that many crews carried weapons upcountry for protection, which conflicted with "official" USG policy, he chose to ignore these reports.

Blaine Jensen flew into the village the following day with blankets, cooking pots, medicine, and other coveted items to distribute and help placate the villagers. In the final analysis, other than being very angry, there was no visible harm to the people or village. However, villagers claimed some pigs and cattle had been killed. Blaine, stating that they would be replaced, challenged them to produce the carcasses. None were forthcoming, as the folks were merely attempting to take advantage of the situation.

The Nam Pit incident did not constitute a precedent. Howard Estes had been slightly wounded from a village near Ban Na in the past. In addition, there was another Meo village closer to Sam Tong along the Nam Ngum containing a minority clan which resented the Sam Tong and Long Tieng Meo. A few Pathet Lao sympathizers may also have lived there. After a number of pilots reported ground fire from the site, Americans became concerned about security at Sam Tong. As a result, Vang Pao requested Pop,

Jensen, the Nai Kongs, and an Agency type attend a meeting at Long Tieng. The general indicated that he intended to teach the recalcitrant natives a serious lesson, and if that did not work, they would be relocated by force. The AID people reluctantly agreed to the plan. Following the attack, Vang Pao applied pressure on Touby and others to replace the village leaders. After Vang Pao's action, Pop sent Nai Kongs and supplies to the site to appease the people and attempt to rationalize that a mistake had been made. Following the episode, a point had been made that was well understood by the highlanders, and there were no further problems. ²⁵

HIGH LEVEL PLANNING

In Washington, dialogue continued regarding a scheduled Tuesday strike on the Plain of Jars triple-a guns. This time President Johnson attended. Only one attack was planned this time, using Air Force planes because of the previous deficiency displayed on Sunday by U.S. Navy jets. Unger's thoughts concerning strikes flown by South Vietnamese T-28 pilots were rejected as unworkable. Massive retaliation to eliminate the AAA sites was the only viable course of action. Because of the downings and other factors, reconnaissance flights had already been reduced from ten to one. As ICC information was unobtainable, recent photos were deemed extremely valuable to gain insight on how the communists were violating the Geneva Accords, and if they were initiating a buildup to capture flood plain cities. If absolutely necessary the flights could be terminated, as had been the case over the previous two years. Nevertheless, attacks were believe required to send a message to

²⁵ Blaine Jensen Letters, 07/01/96, 07/20/96, 08/13/96.
Tony Poe Letter.

Hanoi concerning USG's total Southeast Asian policy; it was felt that Unger did not fully understand the entire picture, and only factored Laos into the total equation. This was not the only problem pertaining to enemy pressure, but this one also involved South Vietnam.

After the conference, a telegram was forwarded to the Vientiane Embassy explaining Washington leaders' position and decision to strike enemy AAA positions shortly after dawn. In turn (without divulging the pre-air attacks), the ambassador was to brief Souvanna Phouma and others on the necessity of continuing recon missions. He was to reiterate that recons would not physically abrogate the Geneva Accords, but merely fulfill a RLG request, and the ICC's inability to provide information concerning enemy movement.

During a long night of wrangling with State, Unger still did not sanction armed Air Force attacks on enemy positions. Moreover, he indicated it was impossible to determine the Prime Minister's reaction to such strikes. Instead, despite being generally against its use, he pushed for T-28s to attack AAA sites with napalm, to make a strong point that the enemy could not shoot down reconnaissance planes with impunity.

In rebuttal, the Secretary of State stated that both Hanoi and Peiping had to be shown that they must leave others alone before tipping the balance too far toward greater escalation. As far as the Accords were concerned, it had long been an established principle of international law that where one side violated provisions of an agreement, such as those forbidding Vietnamese in Laos, or the use of Laos as a corridor to South Vietnam, those unilateral violations relieved other parties of

restrictions on themselves. ²⁶

TONY

Surprisingly, I was scheduled to RON at Long Tieng a second night. This marked quite a change for me. Almost the last man on the seniority totem pole, the overnight stay went a long way toward making me feel part of the real upcountry operation. With each additional night in the hut, as well as what I already knew from Tony or acquired through rumor, as the booze flowed, I was amazed to learn more about the man and his curious personality. Of course, it was clear to me that he only disclosed what he wanted us to hear, but over time one could piece together a fairly accurate picture of a superior champion of freedom.

Apparently, Poe was not his given name, but a nom de guerre and a considerable unofficial shortening from the more ethnic sounding East European "Posephny." Flailing his arms in a pugilistic maneuver, he revealed that his dad, a high-ranking U.S. Navy officer, had been a champion boxer in the Fleet. Looking at the father's impressive progeny, this was easy to believe. Subjects rapidly switched tempo. He bitterly divulged that undercover Civil Air Transport pilot Allen Pope, before he was shot down and captured in 1958, almost killed him with a bomb dropped from his B-26 during the CIA-sponsored insurrection against Indonesia's Chinese supported Sukarno regime. Pope, officially quoted by the U.S. Ambassador as part of a mercenary faction, was sentenced to death by an Indonesian military court. However, back channel sources later obtained his release.

²⁶ Memo of Conference, 1500 hours, 06/08/64.
Telegram to Leonard Unger, 06/08/64.
Telegram to State from U.S. Embassy Laos, 2140L, 06/08/64.
Dean Rusk Rebuttal, 06/08/64.

An early riser, Tony never remained long after dinner. He chugged the remainder of the Mekong whiskey pint bottle Macorn provided him, and departed for his hut across the runway. Before leaving, he mentioned that Vang Pao, who already had several wives, believed that he needed a Meo woman. To cement his expanding power, guarantee loyalty, and cooperation from important village leaders throughout the Military Region Two region, Vang Pao often employed this time-honored method. Since rapport, such as the one he enjoyed with Vint, never developed between the general and Tony, perhaps Vang Pao hoped to achieve a semblance of this through the planned marriage. The general was going to provide a lady who had recently lost her husband during a battle in the north.

Unblessed by the Agency because of a strict policy regarding CIA officers marrying foreign nationals, the union was sanctioned as politically necessary at Long Tieng, and was soon consummated. However, no one from AB-1 headquarters attended the wedding.

Well connected in Meo Land, Sang was a half-sister to one of Vang Pao's four wives. Thus related to Touby Ly Fong's privileged clan, she attended school in both Vientiane and Thailand, and held dual citizenship. Sweetening the match, Vang Pao reputedly presented Tony with a parcel of land in the grassy hills of Mounq Cha, and the American later purchased some beef cattle to graze there.

Tony was embarrassed over the entire affair, and not keen about farangs attending the wedding. Still, a small handful of Americans from both Site-20 and 20A attended the native ceremony. In the area, Terry Burke saw the couple exiting the

ceremony hut and noted that Tony was drunk. His wife was very pretty and the only Meo woman he ever observed wearing makeup.²⁷

Following the union, Tony rarely remained with us long after dinner. For a time, there was a noticeable change in the man. He appeared somewhat calmer, perhaps because of the release of sexual energy. However, he was still basically old Tony and he managed to consume a respectable amount of alcohol within a relatively short time. Then he disappeared into the darkness, muttering and gesturing in the well-recognized manner that he, "*had to make a baby.*" It was obvious he badly wanted to produce a child, and I heard the statement often enthusiastically repeated when I RON'd. The mating task appeared an obsession, one his world revolved around.

A definite Ying-Yang force continued to unfold regarding Tony's complex warrior personality. To confirm that Meo guerrillas in areas of Military Region Two were killing the enemy they claimed, he required tangible proof in the form of easily transportable severed ears. When queried, he denied the practice of paying for human organs. One night while in his cups, he took Wayne Knight to his quarters and retrieved several metal rings full of ears. To dispel any notion of barbarity, he managed to convey to Wayne they were actually an apparition and he did not have a collection of ears.

A kinder more humane side of the man was evidenced in his treatment of a spastic Meo youngster. Unlike the coffee pot houseboy, who could function normally to a fair degree, this individual was a bona fide poor devil, and an outcast among his people (but not shunned like a leper). Poe, taking pity on him, folded the boy under his wing and, at his own expense, outfitted him with a new uniform and boots. During awards ceremonies, he

²⁷ Terry Burke Email, 02/24/04.

positioned him to one side in his own personal squad of unfortunates. Then, after VP's medal awards to regular troops, Tony presented the spastic individual with the "Order of the White Horse." The "medal," a small plastic white horse, came from around the neck of Tony's "dead soldier" scotch whiskey bottles. The boy was delighted, and the award looked good pinned to his lapel. As Tony's consumption increased, there were many similar awards. ²⁸

TAKING THE FIGHT TO THE ENEMY

As planned in Washington circles, the USAF strike began shortly after sunrise. For the first time, four SAC "Yankee Team Tanker Task Force" KC-135 jets from Clark Air Force Base rendezvoused with and refueled eight F-100 fighter-bombers over Da Nang. Then they loitered over southern Laos to provide necessary post-strike refueling to the thirsty jet plane engines. ²⁹

The planes darted toward the target area in two flights of four. However, the flights became separated because of adverse weather, and pilots had considerable trouble finding the target. Waterpump T-28 pilots orbited the area to provide rescap cover for H-34 crews skirting the fringe of the battle area and others standing by at Long Tieng. Using 750 pound bombs (napalm was denied at the last moment), experiencing heavy ground fire, the first division eventually found and attacked the old French star-shaped fort near Xieng Khouang, located on the west side of the Plain of Jars.

²⁸ EW Knight Email, 07/01/00.

²⁹ Berger, Carl *USAF Southeast Asia*.

The second flight, still disoriented, orbited twice, found what they believed was the pre-briefed target, and salvoed their bombs. It was a fort just like they had been briefed about, but the wrong one. The citadel lay near Phong Savan town on the east side of the Plain of Jars, ten miles away from the original target.

In Washington, word of the bombing was leaked to the press. In addition, the errant bombing run, a purported strike on Khang Khay, elicited an outcry from the communist camp regarding a violation of Lao airspace. In a poorly veiled threat, Chou en Lai cautioned that Laos was a close neighbor of China. Consequently, because of the adverse publicity generated by the strikes, Souvanna Phouma halted Yankee Team operations.³⁰

Airborne SAR duty was an entirely new mission for us. On the morning of the Air Force strike on enemy AAA positions, we launched early to support the brand new phase in the war, and although not really stated as such, to provide SAR assistance if needed. My previous strategy focused on avoiding enemy hot spots, and it would be foolish not to admit I felt a little nervous at the thought of possibly flying toward or into the mouth of death should a jet go down. Still, it was pure delight to circle at altitude on the Plain's periphery and watch the distant air strikes and bombs exploding on enemy targets. Following a plunging silver streak, vertical splashes of gray smoke and pale brown dirt blew skyward, creating smoking holes in the ancient landscape. Although elated at our first attempt to destroy enemy war capability in territory that used to be off limits, I realized that this action constituted yet another major escalation. I also worried that the communists might

³⁰ Memorandum from McGeorge Bundy to LBJ, 06/12/64. Victor Anthony, 113, 115.

challenge the U.S. air threat with their own aircraft. If so, we would be sitting ducks for their experienced pilots and the Soviet jets still equipped with guns (guns on our newer planes had been phased out after the Korean War). Tony later informed me that there were no enemy planes available to counter American action. Frankly, I did not entirely believe his statement, and considered it one merely calculated to ease my fears and placate my doubts. It certainly would be wise to keep my eyes open for all eventualities.

With unconfirmed reports and speculation about the health and disposition of the Navy pilot, the search for Lieutenant Charles Klusmann continued. Leads passed from any villager were explored, and no clue was too small to pursue. The exercise became a license to steal, for we performed no actual work other than trolling distant areas for the downed pilot. It did provide an advantage to view areas rarely flown over in the past.

That afternoon I teamed with Scratch Kanach. We tracked into remote eastern border areas, where I definitely had never ventured, and seriously doubted that he had either. At least we were acquiring area familiarization in regions not yet charted on maps, but it was uncomfortable flying, and I was doubtful that we would ever use this knowledge again.³¹ Unending lines of very high east-west mountain ranges delineated border areas separating Laos from North Vietnam. Even if I had possessed a map depicting the border, I knew it would have been useless for navigation, as such areas were largely printed in white, indicating all relief data was incomplete.

As a cloud cover thickened and the afternoon waned, Scratch finally reversed course for home plate. I was relieved, for up to that point we had discovered or accomplished nothing. He

³¹ In later years missions would take me into these areas again.

elected to fly just below the base of the clouds close to or directly over the highest ridgelines. Consistent with my learning experience at Phou Kabo with Red Austin, I hung back a bit in trail. At the lower altitude, I observed circular dirt earthworks with fighting holes located along the razorback ridges. Apparently, the forts were abandoned, for I noticed no activity, nor did we receive any ground fire. However, since we cruised well below the effective range of small arms fire, I cautioned Chris to be ready for any eventually. We passed the positions so quickly that I could only speculate whether the pits were originally dug by Meo French Marquis in the fifties during the first Indochina War, or ones from the early 1960s, or were even new. For all I knew, they could have even been enemy positions from some recent conflict, although I really did not believe this, for the enemy was more prone to directly attack our forces rather than assume a defensive posture. Scratch claimed he never saw the positions, and as we really did not know our exact location, the location remained a mystery. I breathed a little easier when reentering familiar terrain.

KLUSMANN'S SAGA

Unger sent a flash message to State with an unconfirmed report that Lieutenant Chuck Klusmann was incarcerated at Khang Khay.

On the eighth, Chuck and his captors moved along trails toward Xieng Khouang Ville. During the day, he observed a few high flying aircraft. Late in the afternoon, they arrived at a destination where his captors provided him with two buckets of water, soap, and a canteen cup. He discovered that his first bath since leaving the carrier was both refreshing and invigorating. The evening meal, consisting of boiled rice and

pork, was filling and delicious, and it enabled him to obtain a good night's sleep despite being in a cage.

The next day, he partially understood his guards to say that they were going to Vientiane by truck. Instead, they headed slowly west toward the Plain of Jars in a canvas covered, two and a half ton vehicle. They did not get far, for the road surface was in very poor condition from recent rains.

A USAF raid commenced behind them. As jets roared up and down Route-4, the group disembarked, and hid under a farmhouse until the raid was complete. One bomb hit on the edge of an AAA site, but most landed on the valley floor. Later they walked two miles and waited for transportation. The truck's progress was slow, allowing the prisoner (POW) to observe soldiers in every small village or cluster of huts. By the time they reached the Plain of Jars, it was dark, but he had a vague idea of where he was from lightning flashes.

They traveled on the Plain until reaching more hilly terrain. Upon reaching Khang Khay, a sentry would not let them through the gate (probably because the ICC had occasional access to the site), so they continued northeast, making several false turns and retracing their steps in the road. Well after dark, despite light rain, Chuck noticed an increase in the number of vehicles on the road. Finally, the truck mired in a small stream while attempting to cross a log bridge. After leaving the truck to the elements, they hiked to the small village of Ban Soum, eight miles from Khang Khay, and just north of Nong Pet at the Route-7/71 crossroads. There they spent the night. ³²

³² Charles Klusmann's Assortment of Accounts.

SITUATION AND PLANS

After consolidating gains on the Plain of Jars, there was concern in the RLG camp that the enemy would be reinforced with regular Vietnamese elements from Dien Bien Phu, in the northwestern military region of North Vietnam. The forces would then attack Moug Soui, Sala Phou Khoun, and move south toward Vang Vieng and Vientiane. Should this offensive be successful, further attacks would emanate from Xieng Khouang Ville through Tha Thom to Paksane. In the Military Region Three region, supporting attacks would occur on Nhommarath, Mahaxaay, and toward the Mekong.

Following the Air Force strike on the ninth, the enemy ejected FAN units from Phou Khout's commanding heights and area. Substantial government armor and weaponry was lost during the engagement.

While the Neutralists struggled to retain positions near Phou Khout and at Moug Kheung, Kong Le's vulnerability from attack along the east and west portions of Route-7 at Moug Soui was paramount in the minds of the FAR General Staff. The FAN was offered and accepted four 105mm howitzers that were delivered by Caribou crews on 11 June. Ill equipped to crew the weapons, Kong Le requested experienced Thai artillery unit support.

At a General Staff meeting on the ninth, with FAN General Amkha present and ARMA represented, to relieve pressure on Moug Soui from the north and west, and to reopen a critical logistics artery, an ambitious plan was proposed in early June. After conducting a clearing action, FAN troops would move up Route-13 from Vang Vieng, eliminate the enemy at Moug Kassy and around the Sala Phou Khoun junction. Souvanna Phouma was partial to the idea and supported the concept. However, having been attempted several times in the past, the concept was not novel. Because

such an operation had always met with dubious results, additional planning was necessary. ³³

In Washington during meetings, old ideas were repeated in draft papers, while fresh ones surfaced to address the Lao problem: Souvanna Phouma should be retained as leader of the RLG. Further Pathet Lao advances should be discouraged. Kong Le's base of operations should be reestablished in another area, perhaps at Luang Prabang. Economic and military aid should be increased to the FAN and supporters, and cooperation encouraged between FAN and Meo fighting elements. ³⁴

Diplomatic means were proposed by State Department officials under the 1962 Geneva Accords to remove the Pathet Lao from the Plain of Jars and out of Laos. At the same time, the enemy should be stopped from using the logistic corridors to South Vietnam. However, Defense Department planners countered that such diplomatic attempts were unrealistic, since there was no existing program to eject the enemy from Laos. If the situation was to be salvaged, within the next three months military action would have to prevent the Pathet Lao from further advances, but nothing currently in place could possibly force them off the Plain of Jars.

Other recommendations presented to "Defuse Laos" included reducing support to the right wing in Vientiane. Should the Geneva conference fail to convene because of USG refusal to attend (from a position of weakness), pre-Geneva measures could be reinstated. This included vastly increasing money, weapons, and goods to the Prime Minister and Kong Le, maintaining the

³³ Ken Conboy, 110, 111.
Vientiane to State, 06/11/64.
Victor Anthony, 116.

³⁴ McGeorge Bundy Files LBJ Library, Austin, Texas, 06/10/64.

level of military supply to Phoumists, re-introduction of small MAAG or White Star Teams, producing U.S.-led South Vietnamese combat intelligence operations in Military Region Three, and an increase of American-operated air transport facilities in Laos.

The objective would be to delay and improve Souvanna's bargaining position should a Geneva conference occur. Another objective would reassure Vietnamese and Thai leaders that the U.S. would not negotiate in Geneva from a position of weakness.

In the extreme case, if the Prime Minister resigned (as he had offered to do in the past) or was eliminated, USG should consider a formal partition of Laos from Paksane south. However, this would pose additional questions as to Meo disposition and the partition lines in the North.

A CIA summary of the NSC meeting in support of Ambassador Unger's request indicated that there would be no comment forthcoming with respect to reconnaissance and escort operations over Laos. Additionally, during the course of discussion of the recent bombing of AAA positions, little evidence surfaced that the event had influenced Pathet Lao intentions.

Unger took exception to suggestions that the Military Army Advisory Group (MAAG) be reactivated in Laos. Although the 1961-1962 MAAG and White Star teams had performed a unilateral and outstanding job, the influence on creating viable FAR fighters was proven negligible time and again in actual combat situations. Nothing anyone could do would create a Royal Lao Army that would stand against communist forces. ³⁵

³⁵ Draft Paper Prepared for a White House Meeting, Document 87 Johnson Library, National Security File, Memorandums to the President, McGeorge Bundy, Summarized by Forrestal in Document 88, Defusing Laos, 06/10/64.

Bill Colby, National Security Council Meeting Memorandum for the Record, 06/10/64.

Bill Leary 1964 Notes, UTD.

After RONing a third night at Long Tieng, I was assigned to continue searching for the missing American pilot. Similar to previous days, it was little more than a fruitless exercise grinding around airspace, but one legally sanctioned by higher-ups.

I was relieved later and caught a ride to Udorn on Bird Dornier XW-PBJ piloted by Captain Bob Hamblin. In Vint Lawrence's absence, Bob had been delivering Bill Lair to Long Tieng frequently to confer with Vang Pao where the AB-1 Chief could gain insight about th general's plans to support future operations.

After all the upcountry horse feathers and gun smoke, I was happy to return home to a more conventional lifestyle, which included a little sex, a few beers, and affable conversation at the new bar, but not necessarily in that order. War was all right to a point, but like everything else in life, it had its place, and I was a young man with varied tastes and interests.

In a back-to-health regime, I began swimming in the pool that had taken us so long to build. I also started playing tennis again at the Thai Army camp, something that had been curtailed for a time after Jim Amalong was assigned elsewhere.

On the 11th, as reported by Pathet Lao radio, several T-28s had bombed and strafed Prince Souphanouvong's headquarters at Khang Khay. Marking a first time admission that they had people in Laos, the Chinese government stated that an attaché with the Chinese Economic and Cultural Mission was killed and five others injured during the attack. Also, the mission was reputedly destroyed.

Five days later, ICC and the organization's Co-Chairman representatives received clearance to visit Khang Khay and investigate. Naturally, the Red Prince made a false accusation that American-piloted T-28s had bombed the town while employing jet cover. With great fanfare, the investigating group was shown two bomb craters inside the town. Reputed parts of the second downed jet were on display. However, it was noted these were merely a clamp and housing from an external fuel tank, and could have been jettisoned from an aircraft at any time.

KLUS

Following inquiries, Prince Souvannaphong officially stated that units in the Ban Ban area had captured the pilot of the first American jet shot down, and he was awaiting a report about the man's status. Leftist authorities were asked if the international Red Cross would be allowed to interview survivors of the C-46 shot down near Tchepone in the fall of 1963 and the recently captured pilot. Waffling, one Pathet Lao leader indicated that U.S. bombing had made it difficult to move about Laos safely, and because of a lack of security, it was not yet possible for the relief agency to visit. Dangling a carrot, he indicated that if USG ceased bombing and fomenting other aggressive acts, the situation might change. He did reveal that the C-46 prisoners were in good health. ¹

That night, while listening to Radio Hanoi on my Zenith Transoceanic, the Pathet Lao, for the first time, admitted holding a Navy pilot named Lieutenant Charles Klusmann. After Air America's failed SAR attempt and the long search, that was extremely good news. I assumed that he would remain unharmed and, like Temporary Ed Shore and Flight Mechanic Morrow, was merely being retained for political advantage.

Meanwhile, Klusmann had spent a couple of days caged in a Ban Soum hut where guards showed him a 37mm site and displayed him to the AAA crew reputed to have shot him down. After supper on the second day, he was ushered to a building for interrogation. Present was an influential civilian to whom everyone deferred. Chuck later believed the man to be Prince Souvannaphong. The civilian asked him if he spoke French. At this point, a military officer who spoke passable English entered the conversation to interpret. The man, Captain Boun

¹ Leonard Unger, 06/16/64.

Kham, became Chuck's chief interrogator and indoctrinator over the next two months. ²

Klusmann was asked his name, rank and serial number and questions regarding his family. However, Boun Kham failed to understand the U.S. Navy rank structure, and inquired if Chuck was not a little old for a lieutenant's rank. Not wanting to pursue the issue, Klusmann indicated that he was a little stupid, and the colonel seemed to accept this statement. He was also queried regarding the type of plane he flew and where the flights originated. Boun Kham already knew the downed jet was a photo-reconnaissance plane, so Chuck said he just pushed buttons and the installed cameras took the pictures. He never saw the photos, so did not know the intended results. Boun indicated Pathet Lao gunners had shot down other planes, and had captured another American, but Chuck had no knowledge of this. ³ During the course of questioning, Chuck received the impression that his interrogator and the Pathet Lao believed Americans flew all the T-28s regardless of markings. They also believed that the war ground on because of U.S. involvement. When questioned about Air America, he claimed that he never heard of the organization. In the end, except for initial questions and answers allowed by military regulations, Chuck refused to acknowledge the rest.

He learned he would be allowed to write his wife and receive mail through the Vientiane U.S. Embassy. However, his release was solely dependent on USG intentions to leave Laos. After that statement, Klusmann resolved that he must discover a way to escape after his leg injury improved.

² Chuck Klusmann discovered during the after escape debriefing that Colonel Boun Kham, who claimed to be Lao, was actually Vietnamese. Soviet police in the USSR had trained him in textbook Soviet techniques.

³ This was probably reference to the C-46 in 1963, T-28s, and Commander Lynn.

The next day guards brought him writing materials, and he wrote to his wife, while curious jailers peered over his shoulder. He was assured that the letter would be forwarded through correct channels. They lied. Over time, he wrote many letters, but they were never forwarded until the middle of August. Other POW's had received items during past wars, but he never saw any "CARE" or Red Cross packages.

Unfamiliar food and unsanitary standards soon took a dire toll on Chuck's already fragile immune system. After spending a morning in the latrine suffering diarrhea, a guard offered him some pills. They helped ease the frequency somewhat, but the episode marked his first lingering illness.

He was moved to another prison, where he spent the major portion of two miserable months in virtual solitary confinement. To reach this place, probably located close to the Pathet Lao training center at Ban Liang, he traveled a short distance south across Route-7 to a typical flimsy hut constructed of mud and bamboo, with a thatched roof, and dirt floor. Windows in the nine by twelve foot room were shuttered. Guards soon provided him a small metal table, a folding chair, and a kerosene lamp. The bed consisted of a fiber mat placed over boards and logs with two blankets and a mosquito net. Because his guards ate and lived in another section of the hut, the hooch was usually smoky, which caused him to cough frequently. Therefore, to obtain fresh air, he dug a small two by four inch hole in the mud wall. The daily routine included escorted trips to the latrine, washing in a narrow stream, and consuming two meals.

The hole in the wall was more than just functional. Periodically, he observed men arriving in the area for four day guerrilla training courses. Toward the end of the classes, a high-ranking individual arrived to address the troops with an inspirational talk. Afterward he issued new Garand M-1 rifles

from original crates. Intrigued, Klus wrote one of the serial numbers on the leather inside his boot. The man, most likely General Singkapo, inspected the captive's cell and ordered it thoroughly cleaned.

On Monday the 15th, following one of Singkapo's sessions, a group of soldiers arrived with barbed wire and began working noisily just outside his cell. When outside, he observed the mud wall had been reinforced and the windows firmly secured with stout poles and barbed wire. Seeing this was depressing, for it precluded breaking through the wall to escape.

Not aware of the Operation Triangle in progress well to the southwest, he still knew that substantial fighting was occurring, for many trucks rumbled by at night, and echoing artillery boomed in the distance. At times, he could hear bombs and rockets exploding in the area. During air raids, guards led him to a natural cave. These caves had dual purposes, they served as bomb shelters and repositories for edible rats. To ensure their capture, the entrance was temporarily blocked.

One time while outside his hut, he saw what he believed to be an A-3 photo bird flying down the road at 10,000-feet AGL. He still had a bad limp and was unable to move fast, so when the aircraft was overhead, he stumbled and fell. Seizing this opportunity, he rolled over spread-eagled on his back, for at 550 knots he knew the computerized cameras were efficient enough to film him.

His interrogator arrived every evening for an hour to chat in a small room just outside his cell. At first, Boun seemed more interested in conversing about politics than obtaining military information, something in which he seemed well versed. At times, he carried books similar to Jane's *All the World's Aircraft* and a CINCPACFLEET organization manual. He surprised Chuck with information regarding details of the USS *Kitty Hawk*.

One evening, Klusmann caught the man lying, and jabbed a finger toward him. When Boun became very angry Chuck learned that it was the wrong gesture to make to an Oriental. Overall they generally interacted well. Chuck later determined that the man was after tidbits of information for publicity and political gain.

On 26 June, and again on 12 July, false rumors concerning Klusmann's execution circulated through the Vientiane diplomatic corps. One can only speculate how this unverified report started, other than to keep the West off balance and gain some leverage in local politics and world opinion. Chuck was informed that there were reports of his demise, and believed it a ploy to stimulate him to conduct a radio propaganda broadcast to enlighten others that he was alive. Right from the first day after his capture, he was informed that he would soon be released, but after time, he realized this was never going to happen.

Chuck was very much alive. About two weeks after his downing, he was forced to pose for a fake picture reputed to have been taken at the time of his capture, with armed troops standing around him. The picture ended up in the Hanoi archives. Forwarding mail to and from him proved difficult, for ICC flights even with the Polish commissioner onboard were rarely allowed into Khang Khay.

Realizing that hopes of his release were dim, despite not feeling particularly well, he decided to attempt escape. He still limped appreciably, but religiously paced his room to strengthen his mind and body while planning the breakout. After seven days of rain, on 1 July his chance arrived when he observed the nearby stream swollen to many times its normal size. Therefore, without being exactly aware of where he was located, except somewhere east of the Plain of Jars, he planned

to tunnel under the muddy floor, slither out to the stream, and float past the guards. He would only do this at night and hide during the day. Without knowledge of Lao river systems, if lucky, he hoped the stream entered a larger river, which he believed might flow ninety miles south to the Mekong.

For a week, he labored nightly on the project. Hoping the guards would not notice the disturbed earth, he loosened muddy soil and replaced it toward morning. He dug down two vertical feet, then shifted horizontally until reaching sharpened, three-inch bamboo poles buried deep outside the wall. Dashing hopes of escape, the poles were too close together for a man to squeeze between. Realizing the attempt fruitless, he aborted the task and filled in the hole. Although he believed the guards were suspicious of his actions, they never mentioned anything to him.

Shortly afterward, he became sick with a raging fever. Virtually in a daze for about two weeks, he lost interest in mundane activities and time. Despite his illness, the evening sessions with Boun Kham continued. Finally recognizing an opening, the interrogator took advantage of Chuck's weakened condition and coerced him into writing a short note to Prince Souvannaphong requesting his release. Chuck was not sure what he said at the time, but trusted it provided a means of being left alone. Apparently deemed unsatisfactory for achieving leftist political dividends, Boun insisted on dictating a more appropriate letter. Unable to resist, Klusmann wrote the letter.

A week later, the fever subsided and he began to feel better, but he still suffered from debilitating dysentery. He saw Colonel Boun one last time, during which the letter was read to him. Chuck instantly realized that while in his semi-conscious state, he had seriously breached the military Code of Conduct. This made him angry and more determined to escape or die trying.

On 1 August, he was moved to the Sai Phoun Prison located in the Khang Khay area. During the short trip, he passed a familiar-looking two-story wood frame building with a multitude of antennae sprouting from the roof. He and his captors soon arrived at an equally familiar-looking figure eight type road. He easily recognized the area, for while airborne, the figure-eight configuration was considered an unusual landmark. During an earlier mission, Chuck had spotted it while conducting a run along Route-7. He commenced a quick 360-degree circle. It was some consolation knowing his approximate location.

Isolated from the main road and Pathet Lao headquarters, the complex contained a long building divided into three rooms, two empty buildings, guard quarters, a cook shed, and a guard shack by the only gate. A stream ran outside the area with two sheds on the bank. Guards were concentrated in the road's upper loop. Four PT-76 tanks sat to the west in a vehicle park adjacent to the prison compound.

He was ensconced in the building's center room with similar dimensions to his previous cell. The room was almost bare except for a bed and a stick frame to accommodate a mosquito net. He was required to leave his door open at night, so the duty guard could periodically verify his presence. Contrasting with his former cell, this prison had a three-foot gap between the building and the first high barbed wire fence, to which he had access to enjoy sunshine and fresh air. Decidedly more formidable than the other jail, this security zone posed a double barbed wire fence with a five-foot separation and concertina wire packed between. The roof was thatched, but had the added the security of corrugated tin.

The day after his arrival, thirty five Lao and a few Thai prisoners tramped into the building and were divided between the two end rooms. They were not treated as well as the American,

did not have mosquito nets, and slept on planks arranged in a "U" shape around the walls. During his incarceration, Klusmann had learned some Lao words, but communication with the new POWs was impossible at first. Within a short time, he discovered that a few men knew some English words. One friendly man possessed an English-Lao dictionary that aided in his quest to understand who they were. Using a pointee-talkee fashion, he pointed to a sentence in the book and learned that the man was a Pathet Lao politician from Vientiane, who had made a serious error in judgement. After working with the man, he became able to converse on a rudimentary level with others. Most of the others were relatively harmless individuals. Some were minor thieves, or disgruntled Pathet Lao who had either made statements against the movement or vocally disagreed with the doctrine of their local political cadre. Apparently, there were six officers in the group, but he was unable to determine from which faction.

Chuck was still interested in escaping by using the same plan of entering a swollen river and proceeding westward. However, this strategy was risky from a time element and exposure prospective. Moreover, it would have to wait until he regained full strength.

After a few days, a youngster by the name of Boun Mi approached him regarding the possibility of escape. Fearing a mole, Chuck was apprehensive. He pretended to be unaware of their location and asked Boun to draw an area map containing the river's course that ran by his former prison. Surprisingly, with help from the "politician," Boun constructed an accurate chart. Aware that most people could not read maps, Klusmann was highly impressed with Boun's ability and intelligence, and he began trusting him. When Chuck proposed his stream escape, Boun indicated there were nasty waterfalls and other hazards along its course. A river ran across the Plain of Jars, and if an

individual did not cross the first night, there were no trees, bushes or other concealment in which to hide. Furthermore, 5,000 Pathet Lao traversed the center of the Plain of Jars. That information ended thoughts of a water escape.

Boun Mi was lumped among many disgruntled young men Pathet Lao recruiters had promised rewards, but was one who actually received very little. Boun hailed from a remote Khamu village in southwest Luang Prabang province. Largely uneducated, when deemed old enough, he journeyed to Luang Prabang with the older men to help purchase essential commodities for the village. While at the royal capital, he saw his first car. He was immediately entranced by motor vehicles and dreamed about being a truck driver. Shortly after returning home, a team of Pathet Lao recruiters entered his village. They spouted the communist line regarding the good life in the PLA. The village's young men heard rhetoric about freeing their country from the RLG and American domination, and the new uniforms, food, and good pay offered. In addition, if they worked diligently and were studious, instructors would teach them to fly airplanes and drive motor vehicles. At the time, the youths had little concept about belonging to a country or of an American, but Boun Mi was thrilled at the prospect of becoming a truck driver. Therefore, along with five other boys, he left to be a soldier.

He was an intelligent, hardworking individual, and over a four-year period advanced to the rank of sergeant. However, he disliked the daily political indoctrinations. Most of all, he objected to being repeatedly passed over for driver training. The rejection was especially annoying while observing newer and better educated Lao selected before him. Finally, handlers noted his dissent and he was jailed.

Over the following two weeks, Chuck and Boun, after weighing pros and cons, devised another escape plan encompassing

details about how to breach the fences and the best direction to travel.⁴

⁴ Segment Sources:

Memorandum to Ambassador Unger from Doctor Charles Weldon, 09/04/64.
Undated Military Debriefing, Release Concerning the Capture,
Imprisonment, and Escape of Lieutenant Charles F. Klusmann, USN.
Chuck Klusmann, *The Price of Freedom*, Email, 12/27/97.
Chuck Klusmann Interview Conducted at Author's house, 04/03/98.
Letter from Boun Mi to Klusmann, 10/23/64.
Charles Weldon Email, 02/16/98.

With few or no positive developments in Southeast Asia to crow about, Washington hawks began formulating tough questions relating to the delay in confronting North Vietnamese leaders. Since communist violations of the 1954 and 1962 Geneva Accords were gradually thwarting USG policy, was the U.S. prepared to go the extra mile and bring force to bear on Hanoi to comply with the Accords in both Laos and South Vietnam?

Lacking a common assessment of operational objectives, the current Southeast Asian policy was tailored to delay any decision until results of the November presidential elections (a muddle through mentality?). However, the President required clear understanding pertaining to the risks of political collapses of friendly governments in Vientiane and Saigon and continued support of the Accords.

Believing diplomacy only to be effective during a conflict, the time seemed ripe for the President to commit to a confrontation.¹

Other hawkish memorandums circulated among movers and shakers close to the President. One stated that USG had almost established the intention to continue reconnaissance flights in Laos on an as needed basis. However, this policy was contingent on Souvanna Phouma's approval to support the ICC and Geneva Accords. Reconnaissance would continue over the Plain of Jars and the Military Region Three Panhandle where there was evidence of significant enemy movement directed toward South Vietnam.

¹ Memorandum from Counselor and Chairman of the Policy and Planning Council, Walter W. Rostow to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, William Bundy, 06/11/64.

Looking into the future, specific targeting should be developed in the Panhandle, east of the Plain of Jars, Ban Ban, and border areas beyond Nong Het. Plans to strike these targeted areas should be shelved until required to achieve a diplomatic objective. ²

Ambassador Unger met with Souvanna, who, after the FAN loss at Phou Khout, indicated that he was in favor of reconnaissance flights resuming after 12 June. He planned to speak to the press in the afternoon, and did not want the use of jet escorts mentioned, but to merely tout T-28 use in support of his government. The ambassador convinced him that mention of escorts was necessary to assure Congress and the American people that our photo planes were adequately protected, and to signal the communists of our intentions.

Following the Prime Minister's press conference regarding resumption of reconnaissance flights, USG suspended flights for 48-hours. After authorizing the flights, the JCS restricted the missions to 10,000 feet above known AAA guns, well clear of the Ban Ban-Route-7 and Route-4 corridors. However, this stipulation was waived if it became essential to obtain low-level intelligence.

Following reports of the possibility of enemy attacks and loss of critical towns in Military Region Three and Four, Souvanna agreed to flights in those areas. The Prime Minister also expressed a desire to interdict enemy supplies with RLAF T-28s, especially striking materials transported over Route-7 into Xieng Khouang Province, Thakhet, and Savannakhet over Routes-8 and 12, and to established supply dumps. He sought devastating attacks to render the enemy incapable of further attacks on the RLA, and to create a possibility of retaking the Plain of Jars.

² Memorandum Forrestal to Bundy, 06/11/64.

He asked that embassy attaches work with RLG officers to plan a T-28 program that would savage the enemy forces. Unger then informed Souvanna of the existing Lao-American targeting group. Souvanna told the ambassador to act accordingly, but, despite his knowledge of Pathet Lao violations, which justified counter measures, to keep information regarding friendly air activity quiet. For political reasons, he had to continue to maintain an international illusion of neutrality.

After the meeting, Unger informed State that if USG continued to respect Souvanna's wishes, especially regarding unwanted publicity that might sully his reputation, he believed America could do whatever was necessary to retain the Prime Minister's support within the Western camp.

He would work with ARMA, AIRA, and CAS (the established euphemism for CIA) to create a program to maximize positive results from T-28 assets. He cautioned Rusk to remember RLA deficiencies in stemming PL-VM offensives. He further speculated, assuming the communists did not duplicate RLG air support, and despite some negative implications that U.S. air could reset the balance of power, and reestablish some equilibrium in Laos. ³

SAR STANDBY

By the thirteenth, Yankee Team missions resumed and the de facto SAR standby for Air America helicopter pilots became an established norm at Ban Na. Much had been learned about enemy capabilities from hard lessons gained on the sixth and seventh. Therefore, modified Yankee Team SOPs for the missions authorized a weather plane to precede flights over targeted areas. Other

³ Telegram Unger to State, 06/11/64.
CHECO.

changes included flying reconnaissance at random and intermittent intervals, and at altitudes just out of effective ground fire range. Armed escorts could retaliate against AAA on the same pass with the photo plane, or by circling back for repeated attacks. Low-level recce was sanctioned when medium-level pictures were not productive. However, these flights required authorization and were closely monitored. Escorting jets were cleared to attack enemy positions ahead of missions when deemed necessary to preserve aircraft and crew safety. In effect, somewhat within the limits of the rules of engagement (ROE), "armed reconnaissance" became the Air Force's 007 license to attack enemy positions almost at will. ⁴

Captain Mike Marshall spent a lengthy period on the ground at Site-15 waiting for recce missions that were eventually scrubbed because of adverse weather.

The next day, a USAF RF-101C, escorted by four F-100s, flew reconnaissance over portions of the Panhandle and the Plain of Jars. ⁵

When helicopter availability allowed, the other preferred standby site for SAR duty became Houa Moung north of the PDJ. Bracketing the PDJ target area, we were believed to be staged in excellent positions to react to emergency calls from aviators in trouble. Of course, we were still the last ones in the loop to have prior knowledge regarding strikes.

The following day, stopping at Vientiane both ways, Chris and I ferried Hotel Foxtrot to Long Tieng to exchange with Hotel-15. With poor weather confronting me, circumnavigation, delays, and en route landings extended my flight time.

⁴ Victor Anthony, 117.

⁵ Edward Greenhalgh, *Voodoo*, 59.

On the 15th, Mike Marshall and I flew a periodic night proficiency training. For me, the session consisted of one ADF approach and five night landings.

USG's pragmatic policy regarding Laos continued to prevail in Washington. At White House level, a contingency plan was sought for a military reaction to possible enemy advances in Laos, particularly in Military Region Four. Trouble had increased in the south, particularly in Attapeu Province, where Pathet Lao units destroyed two bridges to the north on Route-16. Responding to increased pressure, T-28 pilots working out of the Pakse airport attacked Pathet Lao installations southwest of Attapeu and west of the Se Kong (river) near the Cambodian border. ⁶

Additional armed escorted reconnaissance missions were authorized, but conducted in a safer manner. To enhance strike capability, CINCPAC declared that any fighter or attack aircraft available in the theater constituted an escort asset for Yankee Team missions. Therefore, General Moore directed that during strikes, two F-100s at Da Nang be maintained on standby ramp alert status with pilots in the cockpit, an additional two crews prepared for a fifteen minute alert, and four more were assigned to one-hour alert. ⁷

Internal discussions among Agency hierarchy were no less certain than White House advisors about the future course of action to take in Laos. Current objectives were vital to define, and methods for achieving them needed to be implemented.

A neutral and viable Royal Lao Government was desired to present a situation in which neither the government nor the

⁶ ARMA Vientiane, 06/21/64.

⁷ Bundy, Memorandum for the Record, 06/15/64.
CHECO.

territory was used to threaten the stability of South Vietnam or Thailand. If the enemy excessively and continuously violated the Geneva Accords, without the organization's help, USG would have to act through unilateral means to seek Geneva Accords objectives. However, an immediate conference was deemed necessary to iron out problems. Taking advantage of current evidence and the split in the Soviet-Sino communist ranks, USG negotiators had to be tough in search of a solution. Should a conference result, preparations should be made for U.S. troops to move into Laos along the South Vietnamese and Thai borders and Mekong river towns.

Such a move would be more effective, since bombing targets in Laos and North Vietnam were unlikely to force Hanoi to comply with USG demands. In fact, plans for large-scale military attacks against targets in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DVR) were discarded or tabled. ⁸

⁸ Memorandum from the ADDPS, DI Cooper to CIA McCone, 06/15/64.

Until May 1964, command and control of combat air operations in Laos was not required or well defined in the offices of unified U.S. Army and USAF commands in South Vietnam. The onset of Yankee Team reconnaissance missions changed this. During a turf battle, Admiral Felt insisted that he had operational control of Lao operations through Pacific Air Force (PACAF). PACAF, 13th Air Force, and 2nd Air Division concurred. However, U.S. Army General Harkins contended that he controlled the 2nd Air Division planes in South Vietnam, and was required to issue orders only to General Moore relating to extra-country use of air assets. The issue was resolved as workable when PACAF's General Smart recommended that Felt issue orders for Yankee Team missions to Moore through MACV.

As Commanding Officer of the 2nd Air Division, General Moore was tasked with the responsibility for all USAF activity in Southeast Asia. Even before the recent downings of two American jets, and unauthorized use of Thailand-based planes to support rescue efforts, he realized that a separate, closely held command and control structure SAR unit was required for Laos.

To enhance and simplify command and control of delays and political vagaries of Air Force planes operating from Thai bases (not approved until 20 June), on 5 June, Moore recommended that Pacific Air Force headquarters (PACAF) establish Detachment 2, 35th Tactical Group at Udorn, outside the control of Bangkok organizations MACTHAI and JUSMAGTHAI. Deputy Commander of MACTHAI Major General Easterbrook, with Thai support, and believing that he should control all U.S. military activity in Thailand, objected. Much earlier, he had also wanted the Air

Commando unit attached to his office, but failed in this endeavor. ¹

Moore proposed sending an officer to Udorn with the title of Deputy Commander for Laos Affairs. His mission would provide liaison, advice, and assistance to Ambassador Unger and AIRA personnel in connection with Yankee Team missions and covert air-ground operations. In addition, he would work with the Bangkok Embassy, which was responsible for obtaining RTG permission for USAF deployments in the country and operations in Laos.

Moore further recommended that a control and reporting post (CRP) and air support operations center (ASOC) be established in Udorn for tactical operations. Communications would connect ASOC with Air Operations Center Saigon (AOC), AOC Vientiane, and those at Takhli, Ubon, and Korat.

PACAF approved the concept on 7 June. However, the U.S. ambassador to Thailand supported General Easterbrook's control of air operations in Laos through MACTHAI. Political wrangling continued between Ambassador Martin and the Air Force until 9 July, when Moore met with his adversaries and convinced them of the requirement for his proposed Udorn units.

By 18 July the advanced party arrived in Udorn, and on the 26th, the ASOC and CRP became operational. Colonel Jack H. McCreery was assigned the billet of Deputy Commander. His mission description encompassed all USAF units based at Udorn. ²

¹ I had met the general during a people-to-people parachute jump at Supinburi.

² Jacob Van Staaveren *Gradual Failure: The Air War Over North Vietnam 1965-1966* (Washington, D.C.: Air Force History and Museums Program) 74-75.
Victor Anthony, 131-132.

AIR AMERICA'S CAPTIVE ROLE IN SAR OPERATIONS

On Monday the 15th, a scheduled search and rescue conference commenced in Udorn to define and cement the U.S. military and Air America's role in Laos. Events occurring on the sixth and seventh highlighted the meeting. Realistically, U.S. military planes were going to be shot down while conducting reconnaissance missions, and some entity would have to rescue crewmembers. A requirement for improved and effective coordination and communication was imperative to achieve success.

General Joseph Moore; his deputy commander, Colonel Jack Catlin; and Vientiane AIRA, Colonel Robert Tyrell, formed the military contingent present. Air America Regional Director, Jack McMahon, and Base Project Manager Ben Moore, represented Company interests. Tyrell stressed that a single agency operating through an on-scene commander was necessary and should be designated to control SARs. During the meeting, after revealing an obscure reference in the contract covering work requirements, a fledgling agreement emerged for Air America personnel to assume an **official** blanket SAR responsibility on the Plain of Jars during all Yankee Team missions. USAF aircraft were authorized to provide combat air patrol rescue support. Air America representatives set forth present limitations in the organization's capabilities to provide all encompassing SAR coverage. Ben Moore logically stated that Air America Udorn was neither staffed nor equipped to provide twenty four hour, all weather SAR coverage that would be required with increased air activity. Furthermore, SAR duty, with H-34s and crews standing ground alert duty, would necessitate additional helicopters and personnel. In addition, the communications network would have to be upgraded with UHF radios. Colonel Catlin was charged with the

responsibility for all USAF SAR operations in Laos, but this was subject to Vientiane Embassy rules of engagement. ^{3 4}

Delegating Air America planes and helicopters to a primary SAR role in Laos had proved an informal *fait accompli* even before the high-level meeting occurred. The official assignment only required a formal declaration and the rules of engagement refined. Delegation of the task became an easy decision for upper echelon planners, and required only a simple tweaking of the recently negotiated fiscal contract. ⁵

As mentioned, at the inception of early reconnaissance missions, we were the only tangible assets immediately available to perform SARs. Working throughout Laos, with a major emphasis in Military Region Two, we knew most areas well, some intimately. We also had experience with the vagaries of the country and its climate. Provided some protection by our Alpha pilots, we could be effective with our H-34s.

With rusty cogs in the wheels finally rotating regarding Air America's role in Lao SAR participation, messages and proposals flew through Southeast Asian and Pacific military and civilian channels seeking to bless and enhance the process. Finally, after little deliberation, the Saigon USMACV commanding

³ Earl Tilford, 50.
Victor Anthony, 132-133.
Bill Leary 1965 Notes, UTD.

⁴ All details discussed during the meeting are not available to the Author, but by observation, actual participation in SARs, and logical deduction, it certainly involved supplementing our small fleet of H-34s. Also, dedicating new ships for SAR duty, and hiring additional crews to operate them, must have had some priority. Moreover, considered a temporary measure, there also must have been considerable aspirations for the introduction of USAF helicopters as soon as logistical problems and political concerns allowed.

⁵ Without fanfare, the SAR requirement for Air America quickly extended to the entire country.

officer concluded that civilian SAR capability in Laos was inadequate for continuing military operations, and certain to escalate Lao air activity. However, a hasty proposal to station USMC helicopters at the Udorn base was ill conceived, and did not appear the best solution to the problem. Mainly, it would be difficult to support and operate four to five military H-34s and crews at the facility. With Detachment-6 personnel housed at the Air America compound, facilities at Udorn were already overcrowded. In addition, there were serious political dangers associated with the use of U.S. marked military aircraft in Laos, where it was necessary to preposition ships close to operating areas to ensure quick rescue attempts. Therefore, the most expeditious solution was deemed to provide additional H-34s to the Air America organization. The Company representative indicated that the Udorn facility was indeed adequate to operate and maintain five additional bailed UD-34Ds. Providing on-call coverage during U.S. military air operations over Laos, two ships would offer SAR capability from Site-15 south of the Plain of Jars, and two from Site-89. ⁶

With Joint Chiefs of Staff concurrence, the Saigon unit proposed that representatives modify the recent Air America contract to loosely reflect the new SAR responsibility. Changes would include certain SAR provisions and provide four additional bailed Marine H-34s. These ships would conduct Plain of Jars rescue operations from designated areas to support U.S. military air operations. ⁷

⁶ The Author believes the latter site was erroneously listed, as there was no fuel or established radio capability at the site. A more likely candidate, Site-58 at Houa Moung, did contain fuel stocks and adequate radio communications with interested parties.

⁷ USMACV (Saigon) to CINCPAC (Hawaii), Ambassador Laos, 06/18/64.

THE NEW NORMAL

Shortly after the local SAR conference, Udorn management scheduled an all-helicopter-pilot meeting (APM) in the Club Rendezvous movie room. APM meetings were largely negative in content, generally presenting a management forum for disseminating bad news in the past. I usually approached them with suspicion and more than a modicum of annoyance.

After the few of us either not flying, on leave, or STO were seated, Ben introduced Air America's Regional Director for Thailand, former U.S. Marine Corps Colonel, Jack McMahon. At one time the Washington office, stimulated by Customer "old timers" who believed the Company required an organization concept in line with military command structure, established the offices of Regional Director in Bangkok. Technically, McMahon presided over Regional Director of Operations, Bart Bridgada, a retired USAF major; Southeast Asia Technical Services Director, Jack Forney; Southeast Asia Base Managers, and sundry office staff. McMahon was deeply imbued with the Marine Corps way of doing things, and had no previous experience with civilian management outside the military. The Taipei office was never very happy with either the concept, the extra layer of management, or with McMahon. Therefore, the Regional Director chain of command was seldom adhered to in Udorn. Ben Moore rarely reported to McMahon, instead reporting directly to Joe Madison, President Hugh Gundy's deputy in Taipei. ⁸

From his bully pulpit, grinning much like the cat who ate the canary, McMahon first cautioned us captives that everything discussed in the room was considered highly classified. Then he launched into a short, but enthusiastic monologue regarding our

⁸ EW Knight Email, 03/25/01.
Jack Forney Email, 03/10/99.

unsolicited participation in military SAR work. Using a rapid-fire delivery, generally glossing over specifics, he asserted that the military assignment was irreversible, and he entertained no questions concerning that particular subject.

This revelation marked our transition from relatively innocuous paramilitary work for Meo guerrilla forces to that of an **official combat status**. Naturally, we were shocked and not amused over Company management's seemingly snap decision in arbitrarily committing us to such a perilous mission without first seeking our input. It appeared that the heads of us formerly considered non-combatants had arbitrarily been placed on a broad-brush chopping block. We were committed to perform extremely hazardous tasks, so dangerous that two H-34s had already been heavily damaged and the crewmembers nearly wasted. Furthermore, where in our individual contracts with the Company was anything specified concerning such duty? Of course, we had no access to negotiations and details of the Madriver contract.

As the devil was always in the details, there were additional concerns among the captive audience about the mission. Information was disappointingly lacking as to how we would manage to conduct such complex operations with little or no SAR experience, military coordination, and no formal rescue training? For the present, we would have to draw on our recent success and whatever previous military experience had been acquired on an individual basis. Consequently, emulating a typical military "muddle through" mentality and approach to most new situations, during much nervous on-the-job-training, evolving over time, satisfactory SOPs were conceived and implemented.

As an example of the right hand not knowing what the left hand was doing, at the commencement of Plain of Jars reconnaissance missions in May, U.S. Navy leaders believed that

Air America possessed ten H-34s and crews that could be employed for SAR duty. Upon learning that we operated only a handful of machines, the service belatedly agreed to deliver additional helicopters for the new work. Initially resisting transfer of H-34s to protect their backyard, additional helicopters did not arrive in Udorn for another month, and then only after high-level pressure.

As we would discover, SAR duty was casual and not well conceived. In advance of scheduled military missions, working from published daily flight schedules, the Vientiane Operations Manager radioed a selected aircraft upcountry to standby at designated sites for an indefinite period. In addition to guard, discrete UHF radio frequencies were issued for us to monitor. This ground duty was considered mandatory until the strike or strikes were complete and we were released. There would be no hazard flight pay or extra remuneration for crews involved during the down time. Launching on an actual SAR would be predicated on the individual PIC's decision after weighing whatever facts were presented. Perhaps marking the only good news in the meeting, we were aware that we could fly the new ships during normal work, and look forward to increased flight time when not actually on SAR duty. Unstated, but a foregone conclusion, was that if we complied with all aspects of the SAR duty, were diligent and successful in the endeavor, despite accidents, incidents, ongoing political disfavor in Laos over the years, and negative press, our helicopter program was assured continued longevity.

In the same tactless manner, without divulging all sides or any substance, McMahon droned on for a brief time with highlights about how the new procedures and chain of command to authorize and implement SARs were still being formulated and fine-tuned.

We were already acquainted with some aspects of SAR work from the two recent SARs, but he briefly hinted at the usage of Caribous or C-123s as our radio relay and on-scene control ships during SARs. Iffier by far, Alpha flown T-28s would be provided for cover when possible. Despite Udorn management's wink-wink principle on the subject of crewmember weapons, languishing on the back burner as a local unspoken backdoor policy for years, there was no mention of any official approval for crewmembers to bear and use arms. To our knowledge, violation of the Company policy manual regarding weapons still included termination with prejudice.

Billy Z prophetically managed to interject a question about us actually launching into a hairy situation with slim odds of success. McMahon simply retorted that, imbued with previous military beliefs and training, we would certainly go if called. Look at what we had already proudly accomplished.

Listening to the discussion in disbelief, I sat stunned in the first row choking on my bile. The man's entire presentation seemed flawed. I had been raised to believe that in polite society it was proper for someone to ask one to perform a task, never to be summarily told. With the departure of Bob Rousselot, one would have thought the dictatorial military bias he had lent to the organization would have altered slightly. However, it was obvious to us that McMahon, unlike Moore, never remembered that he was now a civilian, not a former USMC colonel. I wanted to utter something, anything to vent my emotions, but after the senior officer's aggressive delivery, I felt highly intimidated and kept quiet. During later reflection, I realized McMahon was more than half right in his assumptions of us, for as pilots we always reverted to our former military training, teaching, and esprit.

Finished flying for the day, Howard Estes entered the theater toward the end of the meeting. Quickly briefed on what had transpired during the meeting, from the rear of the room, he suggested that we acquire twin-engine helicopters like the U.S. Navy Sikorsky S-61 for such duty. This tough machine would be especially helpful during high altitude hovering situations. After his successful, but almost disastrous rescue of Commander Lynn on the seventh, the former Army pilot knew exactly what he was talking about, and his words commanded a modicum of respect.

Wayne Knight did not offer anything to the conversation, since he was probably as surprised as we were by the new mandate and did not know much more about the unfolding situation than we did at the time.

Before we filed out of the meeting silently mumbling to ourselves, the regional honcho again reminded us not to talk about the subject, even among ourselves. There was little grumbling. Most of all, we assumed a reflective, somber mood about the future and preferred not to talk anyway. After the meeting, I never again heard reference to Pinky Eaton's .30-caliber pencil in relation to project pay.

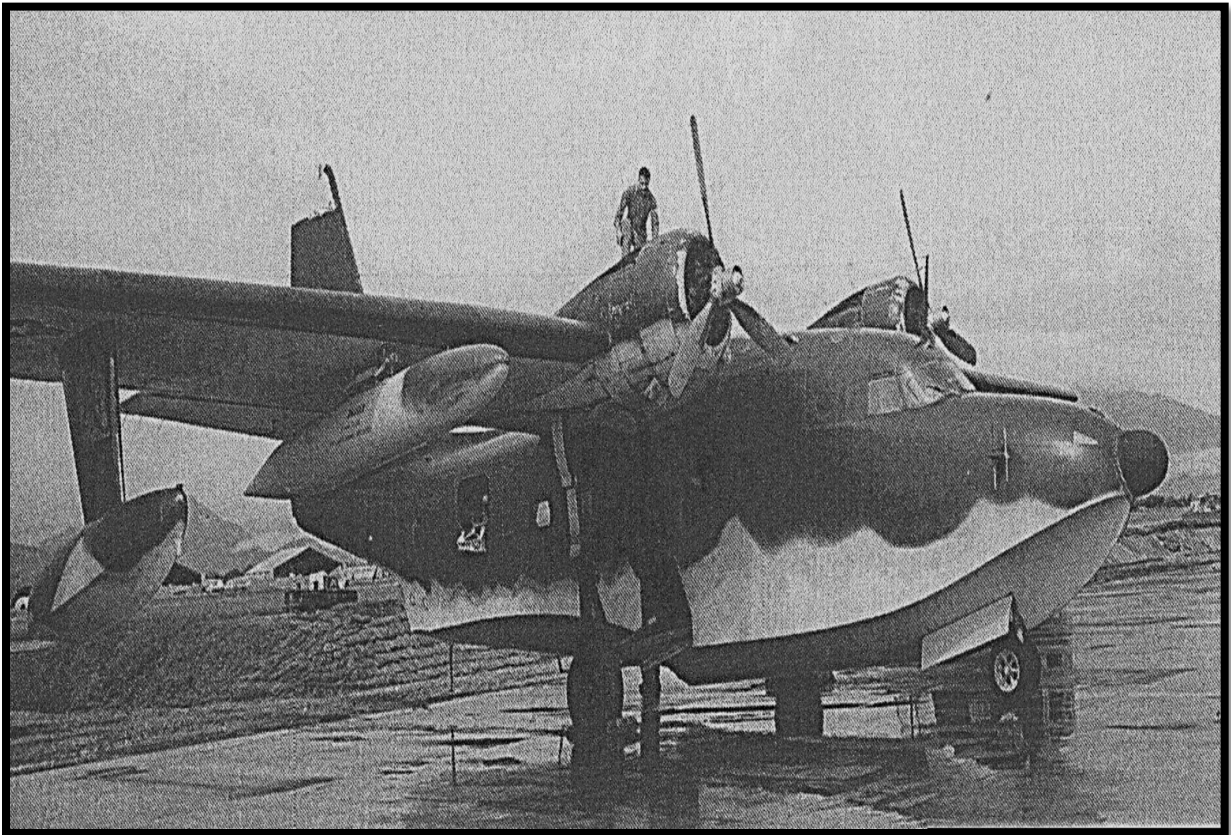
Nothing divulged at the APM prompted confidence in my mind about the dangerous undertaking--the new normal work in the rapidly changing Theater. Apparently, we were trapped. Military planes were certain to be hit and disabled by AAA fire while flying in targeted areas. In my mind, the greatest question about the proposed SAR work was how anyone expected an unarmed, solo pilot, flying a lumbering and highly vulnerable H-34, to safely enter enemy territory laced with formidable AAA, and perform a rescue mission with any degree of success. It did not seem a logical scenario from a longevity aspect, and my youthful sense of invincibility diminished considerably. The answer to

such questions would have to wait, pending what transpired in the future.

Ed Reid, in his own inimitable way, later offered in private that the entire deal was bull sierra (BS). Although he would never refuse an actual bona fide SAR mission, he would not participate in standby missions. I recognized that this was simply Ed talking, but wondered how he planned to evade any assigned duty. Since that portion of the requirement was stated as mandatory, would a pilot's refusal result in termination? We thought so. Additionally, what repercussions would result if one actually refused to take part in a SAR? Who would perform the task? It looked like a no win situation and a job we were locked into for the foreseeable future.

SUPPORT VEHICLES

The process of using Air America assets for SAR required a few days to flow through military channels and voluminous red tape in the chain of command. On 22 June, the Pacific Air Rescue Center at Tan Son Nut forwarded new SAR procedures to PACAF headquarters in order to forestall the chaos and tardy intervention experienced in the Klusmann downing. It was believed that the new method would more adequately coordinate rescue efforts between dissimilar Air America and USAF resources. Even during those bad early days, it was recognized by realistic military planners that successful rescues in hostile, enemy-controlled terrain required a high degree of control and coordination, encompassing many essential elements. Before launching helicopters and escort planes, a downed aviator first had to be located, his position verified, his condition determined, and enemy presence assessed. To collate this information, all these factors required an on-scene airborne



HU-16 U.S. Navy Albatross that initially formed the U.S. military contribution to the SAR command and control effort in Southeast Asia. As more efficient aircraft became available, they were fed into the system.

Tilford, Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia, 57.

commander, relaying SAR information to Thailand-based ground controllers and controlling rescue assets.

In order to implement the overhead command and control portion of SAR operations, the best immediately available equipment in the military inventory, two HU-16 Albatross rescue aircraft, were relocated from Naha, Okinawa, to Korat Royal Thai Air Force base in June.

Manufactured by the Grumman Aircraft Company, the twin engine Albatross was designed to operate from land, water, snow, and ice. The plane carried a crew of two pilots, a navigator, radio operator, and two medical attendants.⁹ The process to scramble Air America H-34s and crews for SAR tasks was authorized through AIRA Vientiane or by the HU-16A plane.¹⁰

USAF HH-43B HELICOPTERS

Following the June Udorn SAR conference, General Moore acted to establish the first USAF search and rescue presence outside South Vietnam. He delegated SAR authority for Laos to the Udorn ASOC, deemed closer to the action. Then he ordered the First Air Rescue Squadron deployed to Nakhon Phanom.

In the beginning, Air America's participation in military SAR work was envisioned as only plugging a gap involving a short duration. We had been promised introduction of USAF rescue helicopters and crews to replace us as they became available. No time frame was mentioned, and no one really believed such a miracle was imminent. If so, why had the assets not been in place at the beginning of U.S. military air activity in Laos?

⁹ As more efficient machines were refitted and became available, C-54s and crews were sent to Thailand in June 1965; HC-130Hs in December 1965.

¹⁰ *CHECO*.
Earl Tilford, 63.

However, unknown to us at the time of the APM, military helicopters were already on the way to lend a modicum of SAR capability for air work in Laos. The HH-43B proved a poor choice, as their first efforts proved largely ineffective and unproductive, merely producing a temporary stopgap measure until other more suitable equipment was manufactured, tested, and deployed.

The Air Force normally did not have helicopters in the inventory. The HH-43A "Huskie" marked the first helicopter purchased by the USAF specifically for airborne firefighting and crash rescue requirements throughout worldwide Air Force airbases. Powered by an 860 Lycoming T-53 engine, the machine's maximum speed was 120 mph, with a range of 235 miles. The Kaman's innovative twin intermeshing, counter rotating rotors displayed good flight stability. Its enormous lift and hovering downwash provided the capacity to suppress and direct flames away from a burning cockpit, while smoke eaters moved in close to rescue crews and attack a fire with foam.

The large Plexiglas cockpit made the machine ideal for reconnaissance missions. The U.S. Navy procurement office bought the helicopter, designated a HOK-1, for Marine Corps aviation units, and the same model, a HUK-1, for the Navy as an all-purpose helicopter.

When I checked into HMR-261 at the New River, North Carolina, facility during August 1960, the base VMO squadron possessed the only HOK-1s. In general, Marines assigned to the VMO reconnaissance squadron and ones who were selected to pilot the machine thoroughly disliked the HOK. They considered it something of a "White Elephant." The weird looking aircraft was not favored, and Captain "Monk" Taylor related a story to me about a machine meshing counter-rotating blades on the facility parking ramp, which resulted in flying debris that damaged a

hundred cars in the parking lot. I first noted the disdain Navy personnel had for the aircraft while serving on the USS *Boxer*. Directly following the conclusion of a ship-to-shore movement, the ship's captain, fearful of the whirling rotor blades striking the deck and wiping out half his contingent of workers and aircraft, anxiously yelled over the bullhorn, "*strike the HOK on the fantail below.*" As for myself, with blades appearing inches from the deck, I wondered how such a strange machine could operate in the field on hills or on sloped terrain.

Complying with the Joint Chiefs of Staff May directive to move search and rescue units to Southeast Asia ASAP, two HH-43Bs, crews, and mechanics arrived in Thailand on 17 June. Beginning on the 15th, the helicopters were disassembled at the 33 ARS Naha, Okinawa, base for transit to Thailand on C-123s. Plane crews then flew the aircraft, the detachment, and supplies to Da Nang for refueling. From Vietnam, one plane arrived in Udorn, the other landed on the 6,000-foot PSP airstrip at Nakhon Phanom (NKP), a strip built by U.S. Navy Mobile Construction Battalion Three Seabees. With engines still running, crews offloaded equipment on the PSP ramp to support the unit. While remaining personnel flew to Udorn to begin reassembling the helicopters, two pilots, the commanding officer, and medics (first employed as crewmembers) remained at the logistically sterile base to oversee their ground equipment. The facilities at the time included three tin roofed huts and an outhouse. Basics were slowly evolving; creature comforts came much later. Late in the month, a generator was installed and Thai carpenters began repairing, improving sheds, and constructing a kitchen.

As there was a requirement to have the helicopters mission operational the following day, work immediately began at Udorn. When this proved impossible because of personnel fatigue and



USMC HOK-1 used for reconnaissance and command and control missions.
Author Collection.

assembly problems, Det-6 initially provided quarters and facilities for the men.

Following the sage advice of Air America pilots, the silver and Day-Glo HH-43Bs were repainted olive drab. By the 19th, reassembly was complete, the ships were test flown, and were ready to deploy to Nakhon Phanom. However, sufficient fuel to operate had not yet arrived at the base. Finally ready to deploy, without benefit of navigation aids, the helicopters and crews departed for NKP during the late afternoon. It was "dark-thirty" by the time the crews approached the area. A mobile communications station (2nd MOB) that had previously relocated to the base possessed a vehicle with a rotating beacon to help them spot the facility.

With final disposition achieved on the 20th, the unit officially became Rescue-2, and Pacific Air Force (PACAF) announced that Thailand-based assets could be utilized for SAR missions, a provision that Thai leaders had approved on 6 June.

The helicopter unit eventually adopted the call sign Pedro, but the machine was fondly called the "Flying Shithouse" by sarcastic crews. On the east side of the "fence," Rescue-1, complementing Rescue-2, consisted of two Marine Corps UH-34s based at Da Nang.¹¹ These ships and crews deployed near the border at Khe Sanh during Yankee Team missions in the Lao Panhandle area. In addition, tasked to function as overhead control ships during SAR operations, two HU-16B Albatross planes flew from Korat RTAFB. This unit was assigned the call sign Crown.

Notwithstanding primitive field conditions at Nakhon Phanom, the normally coddled TDY Air Force personnel, saddled with an inadequate machine, found themselves woefully unprepared

¹¹ The Fence: The Lao-Vietnamese border.



Early HH-43 B helicopter pierced steel planking (PSP) parking area at Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base located in eastern Thailand. The initial deployment in June 1964 was to a relatively bare-bones base.

McCutchan USAF.

for combat operations. No one in the unit had combat experience, nor had they received briefings regarding the military situation, or about the country of Laos. The stated mission to support Yankee Team operations on the Plain of Jars or southeast of Pakse proved impossible initially because of a limited range of 125 to 140 nautical miles. Therefore, until fuel was staged at forward friendly sites in Military Region Two, and the crews gained more terrain and navigational experience, missions involved flying in more realistic areas around dreaded Mugia Pass in the eastern Panhandle.

Like Howard Estes' problem during the Commander Lynn recovery, Pedro crews soon discovered the one hundred foot hoist cable to be far too short while hovering over tall area trees. As a temporary fix, a rope extension was incorporated into the system. At the time of deployment, the HH-43Bs included no armor plate to shield the crews or critical components from small arms fire. Consequently, they developed formation tactics in clouds to reduce enemy visual contact from the ground. Unlike those of us at Udorn, they did possess World War Two flack vests and hip protectors. ¹² All Air Force crewmembers carried .38 caliber pistols and AR-15 rifles. Like us, they solved armament deficiencies by clever horse trading and scrounging.

Fortunately, the original crews were replaced by a second TDY unit in August, and they were never challenged by an actual SAR mission. 13

¹² With the advent of SAR operations, these and other survival items entered the Air America supply system. Dirty and greasy, the flack vests looked like rejects from a garbage heap.

¹³ Victor Anthony, 133.
Leonard Fialko, Kenneth Franzel, *As it was in the Beginning*, Jolly Green Site-Internet.
Earl Tilford, 50-51.
CHECO.
Pedro History.

On the 19th, Carl Gable and I conducted a day flight in Hotel-14 to Wattay Airport, where we boarded an elderly American man involved in a multi-country Mekong River development project. Earlier in the year, soil samples had been collected and forwarded to State-side laboratories to analyze and assess riverbank stability for dam construction. The man did not say much as we flew down river. He mostly observed. However, on the return trip to Wattay, he pointed out areas where the river had flowed in ancient times. It was my first experience with the subject of hydrology, and I found it all very interesting.

The next day, I returned to Long Tieng in the same aircraft with Captain Scratch Kanach, who would monitor me during a Company-mandated periodic route check. In addition to fulfilling the SAR requirement by just working in the area, we helped shuttle troops from Ban Na to Moung Soui, and loaded wounded FAN troops retrieved from the east, where fighting had raged for days.

By 13 June Souvanna Phouma, after requesting the resumption of Yankee Team operations, encouraged more T-28 participation to interdict enemy supply lines, destroy ammunition depots, and support friendly ground forces. That day, the RLAF flew seventeen sorties against AAA positions near Phou Khout. Bomb damage assessments (BDA) results were unknown because of adverse weather. Later in the day, with weather still obscuring the immediate area, bombs were dropped without visual ground contact. FAN troops were hit. The incident revealed that the Forward Air Guide (FAG) trooper possessed little idea of how to control an air strike. Attempts to correct future deficiencies and have General Ma provide competent people for FAG training

failed, for there was too much discord between top brass factions.

Soon after the Neutralists regained a foothold near Phou Khout, on 17 June, the enemy commenced an artillery offensive using four 105mm howitzers, four 85mm guns, and three tanks. With an adequate ammunition supply, the attack proved too lengthy and intense for the FAN to withstand. After estimated friendly casualties that approached eighty five, with the aid of seven harassing T-28 air strikes, FAN units withdrew to their original positions. By the 20th, the situation had not changed appreciably in the Phou Khout area, and all casualties had been evacuated to hospitals.

Enemy intentions for Moung Soui were not clear at this time, although the ground situation appeared relatively quiet at the site. There was some contact with an estimated two enemy companies infiltrating northeast through the mountains from the direction of Moung Kheun. Current intelligence reported that the enemy had moved supplies and ammunition forward to supply caches two miles west of Phou Keng. It was also believed that they had the capability to move troops and supplies undetected along Route-7 from Khang Khay and Ban Tong ¹ under the cover of night and low visibility. ²

Toward afternoon, Scratch returned the timed-out Hotel-14 to Udorn for a hundred hour maintenance inspection. Along with "C" Decosta, I was assigned Hotel-12. This aircraft was also slated to return for maintenance in less than five hours.

¹ Spelled Tang on the map, and located just west of the 7/71 road junction at Nong Pet.

² Victor Anthony, 118.

ARMA Vientiane Situation Reports, 06/18-21/64.
Central Intelligence Agency, Office of Current Intelligence,
Effectiveness of T-28 Strikes in Laos, SC # 08979/64, 06/26/64.

Before leaving for Udorn, I was assigned to work east beyond Padong to support forces holding positions near Pathet Lao elements. On the 18th, encircled and besieged FAR units along a stretch of alternate Route-42 southeast of Xieng Khouang Ville had appealed for help. In response to their plight, T-28 pilots had been sent to cover an H-34 evacuation in the hills on the eastern slope of towering Phou Xao. ³

Following this action, the Zone Two area was deemed relatively quiet, and the General Staff envisioned no further FAR movement. Forming virtually the same tactical situation as during the beginning of May hostilities, friendlies held much of the high ground, while the enemy preferred the low ground close to their Route-4 supply lines.

Since that time, the struggle had continued for control of portions of Route-4 leading to the Mekong. Pathet Lao in strength still held the northern sections of Route-4, Tha Vieng, a portion of the Tha Thom Valley, and the Sala Den Din area just to the south. FAR units (to read Meo) held hill positions overlooking Tha Vieng. South of the town, friendlies held the Nam Ngaip River crossing at Heip, while Pathet Lao occupied Ban Nakang, located a few miles northwest. GM-13 occupied road areas in the valley south of Tha Thom near the Tin Pet Mountains; BI-22 troops moved to positions eight miles north of Borikane; and blocking units assembled north of Paksane. Further northeast in the mountains, Meo ADC troops reoccupied Moung Mo (LS-182, and the southern portion of the Nam Mo valley, where Phou Nong refugees had rested on their exodus to safety. ⁴

³ After Phou Bia, benchmarked at 8,497 feet, Phou Xao (Sao) was the second tallest mountain in the region.

⁴ Leonard Unger-State, 06/21/64.

Combined reconnaissance, interdiction, and airlift operation from Lao, Thai, and American assets in June all contributed to stabilizing the military situation in Military Region Two. Moung Soui's defenses were substantially augmented, and a FAN-FAR offense increased Lao government's position and bargaining power in ongoing negotiations.

The May government defeats on the Plain of Jars were considered the last straw by Lao hierarchy. It was time to act and reclaim lost territory. Therefore, an offensive calculated to bolster morale, relieve pressure, and reopen lines of communication (LOC) to Moung Soui by clearing main roads to the west was conceived and proposed by the Lao General Staff, Souvanna Phouma, FAN, and FAR generals in early June. Wisely, there was no encouragement or enthusiasm from any quarter to retake the Plain. Three weeks later, during an ARMA-Lao General Staff meeting, the initial plan evolved into an ambitious three-pronged attack to seize control of Route-13 between Vientiane and Luang Prabang; as well as the section of Route-7 stretching from Pathet Lao strongpoints north of Sala Phou Khoun junction to Moung Soui.

Dusting off 1961 offensive plans for a three pronged operation that had amounted to little more than a botched field exercise, with the aid of American advisors, Lao leaders modified and formulated many additional details over the next three days. As before, General Kouprasith would assume overall control of the operation. Initial troop movements were targeted to commence on 1 July, with the route march projected to commence on 7 July. However, provisions were included to

encompass a seven-to-ten day delay, should this become necessary because of changing weather patterns.

Except for more complicated air and ground logistics, the plan was deemed relatively simple. Greatly outnumbering estimated enemy forces, a minimum of ten government battalions would participate in the attack. After marching up Route-13 from Vientiane, GM-17 would join FAN units at Vang Vieng. Then the mixed 3,000 FAR and FAN soldiers would thrust north along Route-13 in two columns to seize and hold Moung Kassy. One Group Mobile (GM-16) regiment, consisting of 1,800 men, would be air lifted by C-123s and Caribous on 1 July from Attopeu to Moung Soui. Yankee Team reconnaissance before and during the operation was planned, to include American pilots flying T-28s. Air America would provide support and resupply for the operation.

After forming to attack enemy positions at Phou Soung, seven kilometers east of Sala Phou Khoun, troops would then move along the road to seize the critical Route-7/13 road junction, and block Pathet Lao escape to the west. One reinforced 600 man battalion would attack along Route-13 from positions south of Luang Prabang. An unknown number of Vang Pao's tribal warriors operating against the Pathet Lao flank along Route-13 would create diversions north of Phou Khoun. One FAR battalion would be held in reserve at Moung Soui.

Three and a half artillery batteries would support the attack. In addition to Thai PARU already working in Laos, Royal Thai Army personnel provided the expertise to operate the limited number of artillery weapons provided the RLA from time to time. There were ongoing negotiations with Thai leaders to provide additional army and air force talent where FAR was deficient. Strictly illegal under Geneva Accord provisions, the addition of Thai foreign troops tended to counter what the North Vietnamese were loath to publicly admit: that their forces had

always stiffened the Pathet Lao and assigned personnel to crew AAA weapons.

Two 105mm howitzers would accompany the force attacking north along Route-13; four 75mm pack howitzers with the Moung Soui unit; and two with the Luang Prabang battalions. It was pointed out that seasonal road deterioration because of wet conditions and a shortage of vehicles to tow the guns, would allow the infantry to outdistance the artillery. In such a case, the troops would have to rely on recoilless rifles and mortars for heavy weapons support. In addition to gun crews and infantry, during the operation Thai Army engineers would conduct land-mining operations.

Enemy opposition was estimated to number three battalions, or approximately 900 men, at points along the roads between Phou Khout and Moung Kassy. Enemy morale was reputed to be low, and their supply lines were hampered by heavy rains and interdiction. Detrimental to the government operation, since many individuals in loose-lipped, spy-ridden Vientiane had prepared the FAR operation, the enemy was likely already aware of the proposed offensive, and they would have had adequate time to prepare defenses. To conduct a diversion, there was concern that they might attack other portions of the country such as Attopeu, a province largely stripped of government troops.

Within Triangle's operational area, the enemy would be seriously hampered by a lack of immediate reinforcements. The nearest troops were forty miles east of the target area on the Plain of Jars periphery. Moving cross-country on foot over rough terrain at an optimistic half mile per hour would require motivated infantry at least eighty hours to reach the Moung Soui perimeter. If not interdicted, they could march along existing trails at an estimated two and a half miles an hour. North Vietnamese regular forces were reported 150-miles to the north

in the Dien Bien Phu area, several days away from the sphere of action.

On 23 June, an enthusiastic Souvanna Phouma requested maximum U.S. support during the ambitious undertaking. He believed air power was the preservation of Moung Soui and ultimate answer to Triangle's success. Consequently, he authorized Americans to pilot T-28s, and to conduct armed reconnaissance.

Near the end of the month, Washington military leaders noted that the RLAF had twenty T-28s available in either Laos or Udorn. Sixteen ships were configured for strike missions, the remainder as reconnaissance planes. They then discovered fifteen additional T-28s that could be forwarded from South Vietnamese stocks, and four from Det-6. With this addition, almost forty operational ships could be available for the Triangle offensive. As to sufficient personnel to fly the machines, the RLAF had a pool of thirteen operational T-28 pilots, the Thai had ten, and there were six Air America Alphas. In addition, in a pinch, the RTAF roster contained sixty one T-28 pilots and twenty seven aircraft.

Lao maintenance capability could be supplemented by Udorn facilities to support the RLAF for a short period. Any prolonged effort would require major augmentation of maintenance assets. Seriously limiting any overall air campaign, operational Lao missions were not sanctioned from Thai soil. Ordnance loading at Wattay Airport was dependent on the ability of Air America crews to funnel Peppergrinder stores to the airfield. In addition, C-123 crews covertly ferried twenty five Air Force ground personnel in civilian clothes to Wattay Airport daily to implement arming and servicing T-28s. The men were returned to Udorn at night. Since the inception of Thai-piloted T-28 air strikes in Military Region Two, air-ground controllers had been

in place at Moung Soui. Despite this capability, problems revolved around a requirement for a comprehensive and more effective air control system, as the FAR and Neutralists were not qualified to conduct such an operation.

Initially, fearing the risk of public disclosure, USG was not prepared to broadly employ American T-28 pilots. However, for both the defense of Moung Soui and Triangle, reconnaissance and airlift operations were authorized.

In addition to comprehensive reconnaissance, final Joint Chiefs of Staff recommendations for the offensive included: providing Air America three additional C-123s and three Caribous for supply missions; providing necessary logistical support from available stocks at Korat; authorizing Air America pilots to fly T-28s in support if necessary; and authorizing the use of napalm. When queried by the press, State's official position would contend the operation was supported by the **mercenary** Air America organization, and was not USG inspired. The operation related directly to the defense of beleaguered Neutralist troops.

DIGRESSION

The reader will not see the word mercenary used again in this book. However, a short discussion is deemed necessary to set the record straight regarding the term and employee implications.

According to the World Book Encyclopedia, the definition of a mercenary is "*a person who serves for pay in the armed forces of a foreign country.*" The word mercenary, used loosely in Unger's Triangle Operation context, was merely a State Department façade for the world press. It is true that most crewmembers initially joined Air America because of good pay and adventure, but that does not approach the definition of a

mercenary or convey the whole story. We were not working for a foreign government, but as American civilians, separate from the U.S. military. Call us opportunistic, but not mercenary.

The word mercenary was occasionally used, jokingly by some employees who thought they were enhancing a macho image, but we never fit the mercenary mold. We in no way actually worked directly for, or were paid by the RLG. Furthermore, according to employment paperwork, I was hired by Air Asia Taiwan, but Air America's management structure and mission in Laos obviously revealed it to be a U.S. company.

Since Air America was covertly owned by the American government and operated under a CIA umbrella, we implemented USG policy in the Southeast Asian theater. ¹Of course, aside from some early speculation, this was not widely known or realized by employees, many State Department personnel, or the public at the time. However, it was common knowledge that if an American citizen worked in the services of a foreign government (as a mercenary), he was subject to losing his passport. We always had ours.

In the nearly twelve years I worked for Air America, Inc., no one in management ever informed me that I worked for the CIA (USG), but this was a logical conclusion. In the early 1970s, leftist magazine *Ramparts*, starting with details regarding the Pacific Corporation, printed an expose delineating the corporate structure of the Company. This was a first glimpse into the covert world of U.S. government, and interesting to those of us who had lived under the shield of secrecy. An additional article was supposed to appear in a later magazine. It never was. Therefore, reader draw your own conclusions.

¹ See Book One, Genesis: The Helicopter Program, Chapter One.

FURTHER DELIBERATIONS

With the planning phase of Triangle complete Ambassador Unger, playing the devil's advocate, initially harbored reservations about such an ambitious offensive, and its aims by an army which had failed miserably to achieve military goals during all past operations. On a local level, such an undertaking constituted an obvious escalation in military operation, and was sure to evoke considerable outcry from communist sources. The ambassador cautioned his superiors at State concerning USG's relationship with Souvanna Phouma, and enemy reactions to the proposed operations. Internationally, the action might affect current or future negotiations. Unless the enemy moved strongly against the Moung Soui bastion, Indian and Pole representatives on the ICC commission would consider the FAR operation a breach of the May 1961 ceasefire.

On the other hand, the ambassador was advised by Washington departments that the operation had a reasonable chance of success to eradicate Pathet Lao force in the area and increase RLG morale. However, citing RLA's past contemptible fighting abilities, there was considerable doubt about total Pathet Lao destruction. More likely, they would simply evaporate into the jungle to fight another day. If the operation's goals failed, Moung Soui would likely fall, but this was a decided eventuality without any action. Even if the operation was not successful, the RLA would not suffer an overwhelming defeat.

In the end, it was deemed that overall potential gains outweighed near term risks. In addition to relieving pressure on Moung Soui, it could provide a government sanctuary to which FAN at Moung Soui could fall back, and then link with Vang Vieng and Luang Prabang forces to establish control and consolidate government territory. Moreover, Vientiane military leaders believed Pathet Lao forces were massing for what appeared to be

early attacks on Lima-108. Well-organized FAN forces there numbered about 3,300, although artillery crews were not yet deemed adequate or trained to perform the job. Planners believed that if the site were attacked in force with enemy tanks and artillery, even with adequate T-28 support, the location could not be held for more than a few days. A government defeat there would saddle the RLG with serious military and political consequences, and expose the western Meo flank at sites along the Nam Ngum. Losing Neutralist support for his government would personally crush Souvanna, and perhaps prompt right wing generals to initiate military action that would create political chaos and even might destroy the RLG.

By the 27th, Secretaries Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara, the JCS, and Ambassador Leonard Unger all favored proceeding with Operation Triangle. With further refining, the operation was sanctioned along the lines of the original concept. Unger interjected that eight additional attaché personnel were required to help administer the field operation. Additionally, a substantial Thai Army commitment would provide three teams of Thai liaison individuals, along with five combat grade artillery officers from DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI, and a JUSMAG advisor. Additional Jeeps to carry ammunition to forward units should be provided.

President Johnson's advisor McGeorge Bundy forwarded an outline of the battle plan to the President with current opinions regarding Triangle's success. By the 29th, USG's decision to proceed with Triangle support was forwarded to the Vientiane Embassy. Unger was charged with informing the Prime

Minister of pertinent facts.²

² Segment Sources:

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Victor Anthony, 119.
Professor William Leary 1964 Notes, UTD.

Johnny Sibal and I tested Hotel-12 on Wednesday, 24 June. I detested the job, for even during the rainy season the parking ramp was exceedingly warm and humid. Furthermore, some H-34s released lately from maintenance required time-consuming blade tracking and vibration investigation. As we had no standardized test flight procedures, every man relied on his military service training or common sense to conduct the chore to the best of his ability. Consequently, the test flights depended largely on a pilot's experience, talent, and integrity. Therefore, some aircraft were released and sent upcountry that had no business being there.

While I struggled to whip Hotel-12 into an airworthy condition, Mike Marshall and Howard Estes flew upcountry missions in Military Region Two. Mike performed a formal standby at Ban Na on the previous day that cost him two hours flight time.

Then, on the afternoon of the 24th, while shuttling troops to reinforce Vang Pao's western San Luang flank against enemy encroachment, Mike received a radio call from the Vientiane Operations Manager to cover a Mayday situation. The problem arose during strikes on an ammo dump in the Moung Kheung area when a previously quiescent 37mm artillery battery opened fire, damaging a Thai-piloted T-28. ¹

Amazingly, after 450 sorties having been flown since 17 May, no T-28 had been downed while conducting strike or reconnaissance missions. Over the period, most strikes performed by Lao, Thai, and a smattering of Alphas pilots were targeted

¹ Mike Marshall Letter.
ARMA Vientiane, 06/26/64.

against enemy on the Plain of Jars, the Vang Vieng area, and along the eastern reaches of Route-7.

Despite increased enemy ground fire, the pristine T-28 record likely remained intact because of planned avoidance of heavily defended areas at Khang Khay, Ban Ban, and Xieng Khoung Ville, the ability of pilots to jink and maneuver to evade ground fire, and a healthy dose of blind luck contributed to the program's good record.

RLAF attacks in Military Region Four were conducted from Pakse on enemy positions in the restive Attapeu region.

Personnel, trucks, gun positions, and buildings were attacked and confirmed damaged. However, without follow-up RLG ground action, the Pathet Lao adjusted to the situation by dispersing gun positions and supply caches. Collating pilot claims, post action reports, and visual reconnaissance, intelligence analysis surmised that after initially undermining enemy morale, future strikes produced little more than a harassing effect on the enemy. Still, even factoring effects of the rainy season, there was a possibility that air strikes had caused the enemy to slow or delay planned operations beyond the PDJ confines. ²

During the T-28 flap, Captain Marshall was dispatched to Moung Soui, where he circled at altitude for over an hour in Hotel-15. Flight Mechanic Ben Naval pleaded with Mike not to journey onto the Plain of Jars should the situation dictate, but once committed to a SAR, the Captain felt that he had no choice. The ancient Greek and Roman gods of war looked down favorably on Mike that day when Vientiane finally terminated the SAR requirement. ³

² CIA Intelligence Memorandum, 06/26/64.

³ Mike Marshall Letter.

With Flight Mechanic Lacsina in the cargo compartment, I headed to Long Tieng in Hotel-14, using the alternate corridor through Paksane. Before proceeding to The Alternate, I stopped at Lima-35 to support FAR General Kham Khong's efforts at blocking enemy encroachment toward the Mekong River, and to maintain a FAR presence close to the Tha Thom area.

After working for the Meo late into the afternoon, I parked in the Long Tieng loading area in anticipation of a RON in the administration shack.

Despite the long days of flying the line, evening conversation did not always include the war. That night during the weeds and rice dinner, Tony displayed a surprisingly different side to himself, one to which I easily related. He divulged that he invested heavily in the U.S. stock market. At first, this revelation seemed ludicrous coming from the lips of an old war machine who rarely left Laos' deep jungles. Using a stateside broker he trusted implicitly, dated issues of the Wall Street Journal, and innate intelligence, the scruffy-looking individual indicated that he held substantial positions in several U.S. corporations. After a short investing lesson, he offered that Pan American Airways and American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T) stock were currently good buys. Still relatively unsophisticated concerning the ins and outs of Wall Street, I was quite awed at his acumen on the subject. Out of respect for the man and his newly revealed talent, I decided to pass information on to Dad regarding the recommended issues.

Unknown to us, on this day the U.S. Embassy received erroneous word that the American pilot shot down on 6 June had been executed by the enemy at Khang Khay.

STANDBY

The following morning, while preparing to load for a trip to the east, marking my initial official standby at Ba Na, Air America Oscar Mike Larry Joseph ordered me over the Company HF radio net to proceed to Delta and shut down. For obvious security reasons, there were no further instructions issued. Nothing about whether I was covering U.S. military, Thai, Lao, Alpha T-28 air strikes, or reconnaissance missions was divulged. A time interval involved in the standby was not specified. When assigned such duty, we first ensured that the helicopter was topped off before proceeding to Delta. Then we waited on the ground at Ban Na until the strikes were complete, scrubbed, or we were called to participate in an actual SAR. Standby was a nervous period for me, as unknown situations usually bothered me. Sometimes a scheduled mission was delayed because of adverse weather or other operational problems. In such instances, project pay revenue earned during normal work was permanently lost. There was no provision to compensate us for this loss of income, or to ever recoup it. Extended SAR standby missions were especially harmful to paychecks, especially when an individual was close to or above the seventy hours overtime threshold.

For this reason, a small number of helicopter pilots devised ingenious, but unethical methods to evade participation in SAR standbys. By enforced dictum, someone in our group had to perform assigned SAR duty, so naturally, these few pathetic individuals ended up causing others to assume the potentially dangerous task. ⁴ As standbys would mostly involve crews working at Long Tieng, some types arranged with the Customer to work sites far removed from the local area. Others simply switched off their radios, or claimed they were loaded for a mission and

⁴ Happily, none of the offenders was a former Marine aviator.

could not comply with the directive. In theory, pilots were supposed to rotate standby duty, but unaware of a PIC's identity or his previous standby participation, the Vientiane Oscar Mike merely selected the next upcountry H-34 listed on his daily flight schedule until a pilot responded. Because of complaints about the system, Wayne was aware that some pilots evaded the SAR assignments, but he had only limited control over the situation. He only provided the aircraft and crews, and the Customer assigned missions. In some cases, Operations Managers Tom Krohn or Larry Joseph, through close contact with Charlie Gabler, the Agency Air Operations Chief in Vientiane, became involved in SAR mission scheduling. However, as the Vientiane office was rarely aware of crew compositions, parity in the hateful duty was impossible to achieve.⁵

Never using shenanigans and manipulation that a few other pilots managed to achieve in avoiding SAR standby, by default, I was invariably selected for the task. This resulted in my serving an inordinate number of SAR standbys. I disliked my esteemed peers' non-compliance in assuming SAR responsibility, but I was still the second junior helicopter Captain in our group and had little if any influence with anyone.

Despite my misgivings and those of the majority of my peers regarding our new vocation, we believed a firm pact existed with the Almighty to attempt a rescue of any downed American. Leaving a fellow aviator in the weeds to expire, or to be subject to capture, would be anathema to the basic commitments and tenets engendered in the aviation community. Furthermore, how could one continue to live with himself if he failed to attempt a rescue of an American in trouble? In my mind, such a philosophy really applied to all aviators--whether friend or foe.

⁵ EW Knight Email, 05/01/00.

There was another more personal reason to participate in SARs. Many pilots were superstitious to a large degree, and they believed the cliché that "what goes around, comes around" had a profound meaning. Specifically, if we became involved in the rescue business and placed our lives in jeopardy, then when our time in the barrel arrived, in turn, someone would hasten to our aid. Foolish as that may sound today, this was our hope and belief.

Once committed to the SAR standby, I settled in at the Company radio shack, where the "word to go" would crackle over the side band high frequency radio net. The Thai radio operator, the helpful chap, who saved my bacon the night I discovered myself caught out in the dark and rain, provided rag pulp girlie magazines as a temporary diversion. However, during especially long standbys, I could not fully concentrate on anything except the possibility of flying a solo-piloted mission over the dreaded PDJ to attempt the rescue of a downed pilot.

Since there was little discussion allowed by McMahan at our recent APM, and we were instructed not to talk about American participation or SARs, there were many poignant questions left unresolved in my mind regarding a SAR's execution. My primary concern included a mission briefing, then coordination with available assets. Were we supposed to launch and then, like the shop-worn joke, brief on guard? Recalling Marine Corps admonitions that a hazardous mission was only half accomplished until successfully reaching home base, would T-28 Alpha pilots arrive in time to cover both the inbound and outbound helicopter flights? As only one ship was assigned to SAR standby at Ban Na, who among available pilots working in Military Region Two would link up with me to effect a rescue? In addition, who could I actually depend on to retrieve me should I be subject to an unforeseen forced landing? Given what I knew regarding the

motivation and courage of the men I worked with, I harbored doubts about one or two peers.

As evidenced by the somewhat bungled 6 June SAR, a very brief time element offered a narrow window of opportunity in retrieving an aviator before enemy forces moved into the denied area. Such a situation precluded circumnavigation, calculated to avoid overflying known enemy AAA areas. Therefore, a direct flight was likely necessary to a pilot's location. Because of this, fire power from radar controlled 37mm guns that had already demonstrated the ability to shoot down high speed jets were much in my mind. What chance would a large, slow flying helicopter stand against such ordnance? If one flew at a high altitude, discharges from the big guns might seek after and take you out. A more realistic flight at a low level was equally subject to devastating attacks by formable Soviet 12.7mm machine guns, and rapid-firing AK-47 rifles. Taking into consideration all these variables during a protracted standby weighed heavily on my mind. They tended to foster a headache, and the undue stress sapped my energy. However, Zeus of the thunderbolts and other gods rolling dice on high peered down on the Plain of Jars stage, and pulled the correct puppet strings on us earthly beings. In fact, nothing of consequence ever developed during any of my numerous standbys when I was assigned to Ban Na. Furthermore, I always left Site-15 filled with a sense of relief, when released from the odious duty and returned to normal work.

I was on the ground less than three hours that day. Before leaving Site-15, out of appreciation for previously coming to my aid, I presented the radio operator with two hundred baht, all I had in my wallet.

After an almost two-week stand down, two RF-101C Voodoos, one equipped with state-of-the-art KA-45 cameras, soared over

Laos accompanied by four-armed F-100s. Shortly after the mission, CINCPAC announced that missions flown on the 14th and 27th had sufficiently updated intelligence, and only occasional reconnaissance missions were needed to retain situational currency. ⁶

HOUA MOUNG

Following the standby, a radio technician boarded my ship for Houa Moung. By then, even with isolated thunderstorms rapidly building, I could still navigate using mountain checkpoints and the "Four Rivers" Sop Kao river junction, which enabled me to pick my way to the site with a minimum of trouble. At the time, I failed to realize that Site-58 was incorporated into the U.S. military plan as a primary SAR standby site. This was not a factor for me that day, for there was no requirement. However, during the period, Marius Burke spent a couple of days on the ground there without turning a blade during one particularly heavy strike period.

Regardless of the H-34 SAR requirement, Houa Moung was increasingly becoming a primary focal point for mixed ethnic FAR operations in Sam Neua Province. Intelligence gathering, interdiction of arteries, and a government presence waxed large in an area of historical enemy domination. These elements increasingly required helicopter support in the region. In addition to fortifying existing outlying sites, there was an energetic people-to-people program in progress hoping to win additional souls to the government side. Surprisingly, this was becoming easier, as communist deceit surfaced and alienated the locals. Indeed, Pop indicated that by this time, enemy promises of bolts of cloth and a better life promised under the communist

⁶ Edward Greenhalgh, *Voodoo*, 59.

system had never materialized. Furthermore, paper script issued for food, lodging, and other services provided by harassed villagers proved worthless. In contrast, with our continuous air delivery system available, we were well suited to make good on our promises.

Equally important was the critical war work; the haulage of bullets, beans, and bandages to troops located at scattered outlying sites throughout the area. As I was still relatively unsure of friendly site locations and current situations, Colonel Tong or his designee usually accompanied me during these flights. At altitude, I was never able to spot bad guys, or except for birds flying low over the treetops, any other life in the thick jungles and hilly forests flooding the terrain. However, I could sense their presence. With the lack of immediate help, and usually out of radio range, it would not be a pleasant experience if forced down in the area. Even with survival after a crash landing in doubt, how could anyone distinguish between Pathet Lao or Meo ADC troops, who essentially representing the same ethnic group, looked alike and dressed in similar black pajama type clothing?

When I eventually refueled at the top of the strip and entered the operations hut, the "Coffee Man" accomplished his sole purpose in life. The radioman was completing installation of a new radio calculated to improve communications among outlying sites and operatives further south. When he was finished, and satisfied with the result, we returned to Sam Tong.

Without SAR requirements to contend with, on Sunday I returned to Hua Mung, where I spent the day conducting supply work. When I returned to Long Tieng, my relief pilot was waiting, but all rides south had already departed the bowl. It was too late for me to return to Udorn.

After Tony left early, "to make a baby," although quite tired, I stayed up a little later than normal celebrating the short, but lucrative RON. It was then I realized how much booze Macorn actually consumed at our nightly gatherings. I really enjoyed PARU company, particularly Macorn's, a man who never seemed able to do enough for us. Tony remarked to me at one time that PARU personnel were preferred warriors in Laos, because as Muslims recruited from southern Thailand, unlike the Buddhist religion, the Islam philosophy harbored little compunction about killing humans. ⁷

Bill Lair and his small contingent of American advisors initially trained the men at Narasuan, a police camp near Hua Hin where I had landed in early 1963 with a JUSMAAG officer who wanted to play golf. Of course, with no "need to know," at the time I was unaware of the site or its significance. Furthermore, I did not know that events would progress full cycle, and I would soon become intimately involved with these incredible people. Jacks-of-all-trades, they were equipped to perform many tasks: train Meo infantry, create remote listening posts to intercept enemy radio traffic, and, most important, they heroically fought and perished without complaint or acclaim for a cause that was not really theirs.

This particular evening marked a transition to "improved" quarters. Usually not more than one helicopter crew RON'd at the Long Tieng hooch. Like Pop's warehouse, it was never built to accommodate more than a handful of people. However, anticipating an overflow of H-34 personnel because of increasing SAR requirements, an ever-expanding war, and the need to better control helicopter assets, the obligation to house additional

⁷ As always, I took Tony's statement as gospel, but his statement was not valid, as Dachar was the only living Muslim still working upcountry at the time.

crewmembers was changing. Consistent with these requirements, carpenters had just completed a rain tight, more satisfactory structure tailored to accommodate several aircraft crews and selected PARU.

Located a short distance from the parking area and administration hut, with the current rainy season in mind, the new digs had a raised pallet-like entrance, and an elevated corridor running the length of the building. On either side of the narrow hallway, raised individual sleeping cubicles sported a military cot, a sleeping bag, and a mosquito net draped on upright poles. A window providing ventilation lay at the end of the hall. Although in hotel parlance far from a four-star rating, the new structure appeared to be some improvement over the thatched hooch, and without a radio crackling all night, it was conducive to improved crew rest.

However, nothing is ever perfect in life. I was in deep sleep when awakened by a splashing sound, followed by a fine mist filtering through the net onto my face. There had been a fair amount of rain that night, and I wondered if an improperly aligned tin roof might be leaking. Shaking off the haze of sleep, I peered to my right to confront a half squatting Macorn urinating on the lower plywood flooring. Apparently too inebriated to walk the short distance to the window at the end of the hall to perform his business, he had merely rolled out of bed and picked the most convenient spot to empty his bladder. His bladder must have been very full indeed, for the stream continued for some time. Ricocheting off the wood at maximum velocity and at an acute angle, the urine dispersed into tiny droplets, which then spun upward and filtered through my net's tight weave. Disgusted, I shouted loudly at Mac, but he did not seem to hear or acknowledge me. He was so disoriented and groggy that, after completing his task, he merely staggered back to bed

without a reply. Incredulous, still trying to fathom exactly what occurred, I wiped my face on the sleeping bag and returned to sleep. In the morning, others hearing the commotion wanted to know what had transpired. For a time, the incident elicited laughs in the bar. ⁸

I was not the only unfortunate to experience the yellow stream. A couple of months later, claiming he was drunk and had missed the window, Stan Wilson performed the same indignity on Mike Marshall. In contrast to my incident, Mike always wondered if Wilson had actually erred. Stan was good friends with Charlie Weitz, who was unhappy with Mike after taking a hit on the eastern Plain of Jars earlier in the year, and a recent crash investigation in which Mike had participated, and believed to be Weitz's pilot error. Ever paranoid, Mike believed this might have been payback: Wilson's form of revenge. ⁹

The following day, I caught a ride home on Bird Dornier N4222C with Bob Hamblin. Occasionally small bird fixed wing pilots, aware that former Marine aviators possessed airplane training, let us fly their machines at cruise altitude. Therefore, I was pleasantly surprised when Bob turned the controls over and let me fly the twin-engine ship, that some wags called "Hitler's Revenge," to Udorn. It was not the first time Bob had a chance to judge my flying ability in cruise configuration. Sometimes I flew to Don Muang on STO with him. One day, he turned the controls of the Twin Beech over to me

⁸ Years later when I related the account to Tony in a letter, he replied that I could not have been urinated (sanitized) on by a better man. I readily agreed with him, but placing it all in perspective, at the time considered the incident less than humorous. Like many Thai men, their bodies corrupted by excess, Macorn's heavy drinking resulted in his early death.

⁹ Mike Marshall Email.

while he performed some paperwork, and I found the machine very pleasant to fly.

On long final approach to Runway-30, I thought he would reassume aircraft control and land, but he waved me on. I had not landed an airplane since the training command, and frantically searched my memory for correct procedures. Mixture and props full forward; throttles positioned; flaps adjusted; gear down and fixed; sight picture and alignment for landing OK- I was ready to land. It was a great landing, however, despite all my preparation, while focusing all my concentration on the sight picture and landing, I entirely forgot to retard the throttles and reduce speed. Consequently, I drove the plane on the runway like a raped ape. Bob patiently watched and said or did nothing, but calmly resumed control at touchdown. He reduced throttles to minimum, hit the brakes, and quickly rectified my error. As we turned off the cross-runway apron for the west perimeter taxiway, sweating profusely, I felt a little sheepish about my mistake and decided that I had better remain in the helicopter program. After I informed Bob that it was my first multi-engine landing in four years, we had a good laugh.

As the month ended, it was apparent that escalation had not only occurred upcountry, but also at the Udorn facility. With increased H-34 flight time and the addition of T-28 work, maintenance tasks increased commensurately. And, there was more work projected. So much so that there was talk about erecting a new hangar. Ever ready to make a point with his superiors in Taipei, Ben Moore noted that helicopter time per ship amounted to six times that of an average military squadron. Equally taxing was the influx of people the Club was trying to feed. A disproportionate number of non-Air America personnel (four to one) utilized the bar and dining room that tripled receipts and

necessitated a 200 percent increase in Club personnel over the previous three months. ¹⁰

During breaks in upcountry flying, Dick Elder was kept busy venturing to Bangkok to purchase sufficient groceries to maintain the Club dining room. Despite a canvas cover protecting shipments from the elements and concealing food cartons, to prevent thievery losses, Dick often rode shotgun with the truck driver.

Despite initial objections, increased Club demand prompted Moore to hire female servers for the first time. Quite possibly male waiter availability had dried up and the only alternative was to introduce women. It certainly was not the fact that suddenly overnight we had somehow mystically shed our animal reputations and become perfect gentlemen. Whatever the case, the transition began small on a "let us see what happens" basis. We bachelors gallantly accepted the new situation and actually minded our manners, for the lovely creatures, generally culled from middle class Thai families, added a certain ambiance to a previously male environment. In addition, the ladies positively affected our tempers and demeanor.

Using a Pan American June timetable, pending Company approval, I began planning a twenty six day annual vacation to commence on 15 August. Because of the least delay en route to New York, Pan American daily flights seemed a logical air carrier choice. In addition to visiting the folks, there was a World's Fair that I wanted to attend, and was currently taking place at Flushing Meadows outside New York City. Whetting my interest in the event, *Time Magazine* described worthwhile exhibits and those to avoid. I calculated that I could stay at

¹⁰ Ben Moore June Monthly Report to Air America headquarters Taipei.

Uncle Bill Townsend's apartment for a couple of days while attending the fair. ¹¹

The last World's Fair I had attended was as a tyke in 1939. From covered bleachers, I recalled a Lincoln caricature dressed in a black suit and tall hat waving from the back of an old steam engine train. Later, so I could see over the crowd, Dad carried me on his shoulders to view bathing suit clad people diving from high boards into a large reflecting pool. Toward the end of the day, he took me into a building to view electricity in action. Two large vertical electrodes sat on a stage. The snapping and arcing of artificially produced lightning bolts zapping between the rods and resulting noise upset and terrified me. Attracting attention of those around me, I crawled under my seat and bawled. I suppose being overly tired and only four years old, with little worldly experience produced my fright and anxiety.

¹¹ My uncle, the Assistant Art Director for the prestigious *Look Magazine*, lived in a high-rise apartment around the corner from the United Nations building.

With Operation Triangle slated to commence, July continued an active month. Several natural or man-made events pervaded our Theater. For the first time since Billy Pearson's professed "backward autorotation" crash during October 1963, we lost a H-34. Yankee Team reconnaissance missions, road interdiction, airlift operations, and particularly the weather tended to stabilize the Lao military situation. USAF air assets gradually increased at Thailand bases, including formation of a Special Air Warfare unit at Udorn, six F-100s at Takhli, four F-102s at Don Muang, four KB-50s at Don Muang and Korat, and two H-43Bs at Nakhon Phanom.

An intelligence paper forwarded to State Department Secretary Dean Rusk noted that the situation in Laos was similar to the one existing twelve months before, but qualified the document with specific differences. The FAN had lost their military positions on the Plain of Jars to enemy offensives, which extended enemy control over territory jointly owned with the Neuts prior to 1962. In addition, there had been more defections from the FAN to the Deuanists. During the period, the Meo cause was severely compromised.

The April coup, plus military setbacks in May, had reduced Souvanna Phouma's power base and ability to lead the RLG. Further damaging government coalition machinery, Pathet Lao representatives had rejected Souvanna's right to take any action, and in protest announced that they would withdraw from Vientiane. Exacerbating the political turmoil, the right wing faction increasingly became more militant and fractured.

Lately, the U.S. had become an overt military participant in hostilities, with Hanoi opting to defend its interests.

Such developments increased the difficulty of any effective Lao neutralization by international actions. Communist advances on the Plain of Jars had already fostered a de facto partition in relation to the imaginary lines following the signing of the 1962 Geneva Accords. Options were slim in the quest to maintain neutralism, create a deterrent, and prevent conflict escalation. The U.S. could refer the matter to the Geneva commission, or accept the relatively ineffective RLA maneuvering. ¹

A summary report regarding commencement of Operation Triangle indicated that a Thai army artillery battalion of 279 men, one 155mm, and five 105mm howitzers, was scheduled to be loaded at Korat and airlifted by Air America C-123 planes to Moung Soui on 4 July. All equipment was sanitized by replacing markings with Lao government logos, and the Thai personnel were sheep dipped. An additional seventeen T-28s had entered the Lao inventory, swelling the total to forty one. Ten Thai pilots would arrive by 2 July, with more anticipated, to fly the planes. Air America airlift capacity was enhanced by three C-123s and three C-7 Caribous loaned from COMUS MACV. After U.S. reconnaissance missions revealed enemy supply depots, Souvanna Phouma approved American strikes on enemy convoys resupplying troops near Moung Soui. Lastly, one civilian and eleven U.S. military personnel would work in the projected operations area. ²

Weeks after the April coup attempt, political unrest still prevailed in the Vientiane region. The Lao National Police camp at Phone Khene on the city's periphery was placed on twenty four hour alert on the evening of 1 July.

¹ Memorandum from the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hughes) to Secretary of State (Rusk) Concerning the Laos Situation and Options, 07/01/64.

² U.S. Embassy Report, 07/02/64.
Ken Conboy *Shadow War*.

During a trip to Vientiane, Brigadier General Vang Pao exhibited concern over the current instability there and the possibility of another coup in the city. He believed Generals Siho and Kouprasith were incapable of controlling their subordinates, and younger officers were hatching various schemes to improve the government. Therefore, he recommended that an objectionable cabinet member, Phau Angphet Pharat, immediately be replaced to help forestall any potential problem.

Vang Pao believed that General Ouane Ratrikoun, Commander in Chief, Royal Armed Forces Laos, was responsible for many of the coup rumors. With the most to benefit from a coup, Ouane was contacting subordinates of Generals Siho and Kouprasith and keeping things stirred up, as to who was really in control of the RLG. It appeared that the current political crises could easily trigger conflict. Agreeing, both General Khong Le and VP maintained that the next coup would be led by junior officers, might be excessively bloody, and result in many senior politicians being killed. ³

UPCOUNTRY

After one day off the schedule, crewing Hotel-14, I was directed to Paksane (Lima-35) with "C" Decosta to support Military Region Two Commander, Major General Kham Kong's regional operation. The more than doubling of flight time since March created fat paychecks, but was cause for speculation regarding how long the machines could endure the increased wear and tear on critical components. Also, new helicopter pilots projected to arrive soon to crew the yet-undelivered four H-34s

³ National Security File, Country File Laos, LBJ Library, Austin, Texas, 07/01/64.
CIA Intelligence Cable, 07/07/64.
Sanikhone.

made continued high time unlikely. The delivery delay of UH-34D helicopters was attributed to U.S. military chain of command, people in authority jealously guarding their assets.

Even a proposal that the Thai Air Force lend us some of their machines was met with disapproval by Ambassador Martin. It appeared that everyone wanted us to perform a job, but none were willing to provide the means to accomplish this.

Following the initial pasting by various allied air units in Military Region Two, enemy aggressiveness appeared to wane. In actuality, this was probably due more to rainy season effects and long logistic supply lines than to air power. U.S. military planners failed to take advantage of the situation, instituting additional rules and regulations as to what the pilots could and could not do during strike missions. Politics dictated, and an immediate killing blow never came, which for years doomed our little war to a seasonal land grab, and a grinding attrition on both sides.

While "C" attended to the helicopter refueling, I was Jeeped a short distance outside the small town to the general's office for an area briefing. Kham Khong, a very pleasant, soft spoken man reputed to be a true patriot, enjoyed an excellent reputation with Air America pilots. Part of his charisma probably stemmed from his scholarly appearance. In addition, he looked and talked more like a teacher than a military man. Although militarily and politically affiliated with General Phoumi, he was not considered corrupt like other general officers and their staffs.

His spacious, Spartan office displayed a huge map of Laos fixed to the wall behind his desk. The chart contained the most recent enemy dispositions, plotted in areas that I was unaware of until the briefing. Captured war trophies of almost every kind and description adorned the walls and floor. I recognized

rifle propelled grenade launchers (RPG), AK-47 assault rifles, various mortar tubes, and other types of Soviet weapons.

I had first been exposed to Soviet Block equipment on display at the Quantico, Virginia, Basic School, and in military field manuals depicting the weapons. I recalled that many communist weapons were cleverly designed to utilize NATO ammunition, but this option was not reciprocal.

During the visit, I gained a refresher on what arms could actually affect me in the Lao Theater. Pertinent to my situation, I was particularly interested in and considerably sobered by the size of the enemy AAA warheads. Green bands around shell casings indicated tracer ammunition as opposed to NATO countries' red bands. As I fingered 12.7mm and 37-57mm ammunition, I had a sinking feeling, for the warheads were much larger than my thumb. Any of the lethal slugs was capable of penetrating the old H-34s thin fuselage and tearing through critical components.

Supplementing the impending FAR operation to bolster Moung Soui and clear Route-13, it appeared that there was clear intent by government forces to retake the Tha Thom Valley and major parts of Route-4. We were on a roll.

That night "C" and I overnighted in the general's home. The green wooden house was offset to the right at the end of a secluded dead-end street. Attesting to the high security attached to the officer country area, numerous guards lounged or meandered outside the house. A black tripod mounted 12.7mm machine gun sat on the street in front. Like most communist weapons, the 12.7mm gun was not complicated, but deadly. Our pilot group respected the gun for its high rate of fire, accuracy, and lethality up to 5,000 feet. To obtain a better feel for the Soviet device, I spent a few minutes in the dim light charging, aiming, and dry firing it.

I was surprised at the interior of the general's house, for it appeared equally as austere as his office. After hearing stories about other high-ranking Lao officers' splendid villas and lavish life styles, I expected something far different from what I observed in this residence. As it was already late, the general's aide invited us to sit at a modest common table, where Kham Khong and his top ranking officers awaited the evening meal. I had eaten once or twice in Vang Pao's dining hut with Tony, Vint, the general, and his officers, but never where one could so intimately converse with the principals, and was made to feel like one of the family.

Quite hungry, I anticipated tasty Thai style food, and relished its stomach warming spices and mouth-watering meats and vegetables. However, I was mistaken in my expectations and more than a bit disappointed. The Lao food that appeared was decidedly different and hardly edible. A large steaming bowl of fish soup was served along with a container of glutinous rice, a variety of the grass substance we called sticky rice, with which I had little experience. I watched as the men eagerly thrust their hands into the pile of rice, extracted some, and rolled it into small balls. Then they dipped both fingers and rice into the soup, obtaining a small piece of fish or weeds, and popping the food into their mouths. Even though their fingers might have added a bit of seasoning, the mess did not look too appetizing, but assuming the "when in Rome" cliché, I prepared to try the same. I have never been much of a fish advocate, and cringed when I spied fish heads, eyes, weeds, and other items unknown to me floating in the liquid. It was foul, and smelled much worse than it looked or tasted. The general, a discerning man, noted my hesitation and discomfort. He muttered a few soft words to an assistant. Soon a can of sardines appeared on the table, which I happily wolfed down with a little rice. Although scotch bottles

and other kinds of booze were in evidence in a china closet behind the table, there was no alcohol served, for the straight-laced Kham Khorn was a teetotaler. I learned later from an aide that the man did not condone drinking or whoring among his staff officers. This policy was adhered to when he was in residence. Since I was quite tired, that sort of fun did not appeal to me anyway.

While the officers repaired to another room to discuss the next day's missions, I was shown my sleeping quarters set up in the rear of the house. It appeared like a mini-squad bay with rows of cots.

After a couple of runs out of Paksane the following morning, "C" and I headed to Long Tieng. There Vang Pao's air operations personnel loaded us with ammunition, supplies, and people for a trip to Ban Vieng (LS-89). Located well east of Bouam Long, it was a site I had previously supplied. Site-89 lay almost equidistant between Ban Song (LS-29) and Phu Se Bott (LS-82). Ban Vieng, was a viable Meo site twenty miles northeast of the Ban Ban Valley. It was close enough to Route-7 to be of some significance to guerrilla forces interdicting and ambushing arteries and trails leading into the valley. Despite enemy inroads into the area during May, the base held firm, and further attacks were considered unlikely during the rainy season. After several supply and personnel trips to local outposts, we returned to a wet Twenty Alternate where we completed the day working for the local Customer.

I had a chance to converse with Mike Marshall before he headed south to Udorn. He and Stan Wilson were assigned Hotel-18, one of four Coast Guard G models we had received the previous year. It had been recently refurbished after an accident and the boosted throttles were retrofitted to the standard UH-34D throttle configuration. Mike, normally a placid

individual, was not a happy camper, as he had just spent considerable time on the ground at Ban Na, waiting to cover a strike mission. It had first been delayed and then later scrubbed for weather. During the process, Mike had lost considerable hazard pay.

MONSOON WEATHER

The following five days of ensuing rain took a substantial toll on my flight time. Compared to the nine plus hours accumulated on each of the first two days, during the last three days of my RON I averaged a meager five hours a day. Worse, slogging around the area in mud and slime resulted in my Marine field boots remaining soaking wet during the day. This and local viruses eventually resulted in a nasty cold.

Masses of monsoon rain clouds moved into the area, thoroughly inundating our little valley for hours. Although at a lower elevation than Sam Tong, I still had to wait until either the west or southeast gap opened sufficiently to allow departure. The same principals as those employed at Site-20 applied at the sister site, only missions tended to require flying a greater distance. During especially bad conditions, I sought the lower elevation of the Nam Ngum, or other familiar river system, and followed them to my destination. Of course, circumnavigation took longer than flying a direct course, but the mission was accomplished and it was pure flight time. Since the night at Ban Na, I was never caught out again and forced to RON in the weeds.

Despite reducing my flight time, the rain and its effects on enemy travel and resupply had positive aspects for our side. We were gradually retaking territory east of Padong lost earlier in the year, and our all-purpose helicopters had a great deal to do with this success. Almost at will, we possessed the

capability to move units quickly from mountaintop to mountaintop and exploit enemy weakness. Using this leapfrog tactic, we were able to surround enemy outposts and intimidate hunkered down enemy soldiers into withdrawing, or pound them into submission with mortars and small arms fire. Then, we had the option to either move in and physically occupy a position, or bypass it in lieu of other more lucrative targets. As long as the war moved along at a slow pace and remained low intensity, this method was successfully employed on a seasonal basis.

Waiting for the weather to lift was boring. Trying to remain dry in the damp hooch, to pass the time I visited and talked with whoever passed through the building. This included a few small bird fixed wingers who were also unlucky enough to become stuck in the valley. Without a warming sun in the summer, Long Tieng was a cold, damp, miserable place during wet conditions. Mountain sites were like that. After a time my body would eventually become "cold soaked." This, plus the boredom, resulted in hunger pangs. I tried not to consume Tony's scarce food supply, but after my emergency "rats" were depleted, I began eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches every two hours. I also partook of his Ovaltine, liberally laced with the delicious condensed milk that I had so loved as a child. ⁴ During periods like this, the harassed houseboy kept busy, constantly filling and replacing the teapot on the charcoal fired hibachi. Probably because the increased number of crewmembers staying at his site was likely to continue, and even expand because of the introduction of additional H-34s, by the final day of my RON, Tony suggested that we helicopter pilots and willing Flight Mechanics contribute to a food fund--perhaps one hundred baht

⁴ As a youngster, one time I took a full can of condensed milk to the backyard and consumed the entire contents, while sitting on the fence. My mother was understanding and I was not scolded.

each per month. This small amount would help defray the houseboy's salary and cover bare everyday necessities, such as various drinks, paper products, and soap. Supper was no problem. The PARU and occasionally Vang Pao provided evening meals to the crews. A ration allowance was forthcoming to the folks who worked at Long Tieng. To supplement this, crewmembers often chipped in various canned foods to mix with white rice and the Thai fare.

Tony's plan seemed reasonable and logical. Since we began to RON at Site-20A, we had really leaned on Tony's good graces. With this in mind, I indicated that I would propose the idea to the pilots and administer the program. I envisioned purchasing products from our small country store, and was reasonably sure Dick Elder would cooperate with this aspect of the Food Fund.

MIKE MARSHALL'S MOMENT OF TRUTH

After a break in the monsoon weather pattern, Captain Mike Marshall and his Flight Mechanic Chris Crisologo arrived at Sam Tong in Hotel-13. They soon were redirected to Houa Moun (LS-58) to work on Pop Buell's humanitarian projects. Aware that I was going to be relieved, I managed to work a few local missions on the sixth. I relinquished Hotel-14 at Sam Tong, and caught a ride to Udorn on the Bird twin-engine Dornier N-1153Q.

Following a solid day of flying that included fifteen minutes of night time, Mike RON at Sam Tong. The following morning he was assigned to Long Tieng, where he loaded a Meo officer and one trooper for Houa Moun. In addition, three large bales of black cloth were added to the payload as a gift to a village from General Vang Pao. In Laos, particularly the Meo program, there was little distinction between humanitarian and war support. Therefore, the two seemingly diametrically opposed facets of the Lao conflict, intertwined because Vang Pao allowed

dependents to accompany their men into the field. This was generally the only way married troops would remain at remote positions for long periods. Against this scenario, helicopter pilots and small bird drivers often carried mixed USAID and war-related materials on the same trip.

The Alternate Air Operations then redirected Mike to Sam Tong, where Chris loaded one man and two boys, dressed in traditional black pajamas, just released from the hospital. All had recently recovered from wounds incurred in Sam Neua Province, and were being returned to duty. Before takeoff, Tongsar ran to the ship to advise Mike that Vientiane had just called and wanted him to retrieve the radio operator at Ban Na, and deliver him to Site-58 to conduct maintenance on the site's radios. He complied, but five minutes after departing Site-15, Vientiane called and ordered him to return the man to that site.

Monsoon weather that had besieged us all week returned with a vengeance. The farther north Marshall flew, the worse flying conditions became. After climbing, diving, and dodging clouds, trying to complete his mission, Mike inadvertently entered instrument conditions.

Hopelessly lost, somewhere north of Na Khang (LS-36) in Houa Phan Province, Mike encountered a hole in the clouds and commenced a descent toward a high valley. He circled slowly, attempting to discover a way to proceed VFR, but the fast-moving weather front worsened. Trapped into flying in ever tighter, decreasing circles, he unconsciously began sacrificing airspeed for altitude. Finally, simultaneously running out of airspeed, power, and ideas, he was committed to a controlled crash on a grassy finger ridge leading upslope to a 3,500-foot hilltop.

After securing the aircraft, Mike exited the cockpit to help Chris assess damage from the hard landing. None was apparent. With rain squalls and clouds constantly moving through

the area enveloping Hotel-13 and its occupants, Marshall reflected on his immediate prospects. They appeared dismal. At 10:00 hours, he was stuck between two friendly bases in what he considered "no-man's-land."⁵

During the period between landing and shutdown, all radio calls in the blind had gone unanswered, and Mike was sure that a radio or physical search for Hotel-13 would not commence for a time. Besides, with the state of the current weather, no other aircraft would likely be flying in the area until the storm system abated.

Throughout the day, the entire area remained socked in. Since the machine was perched uphill on a narrow incline, fuel gravity drained to aft tanks from the front cell. In preparation to vacate the spot should a break in the fog and mist materialize, Mike frequently started the engine to transfer fuel to the forward tank. During these run-ups, he called "in the blind" on all Company frequencies without receiving a reply.

The miserable day gave way to an equally miserable night. Deeply absorbed in their own thoughts, each of the seven occupants of the leaky Sikorsky Hotel attempted to remain dry and obtain some sleep. Despite being situated in "Indian Country," Mike was confident of his safety. It never occurred to him to assign a rotating guard outside the ship for security.

Toward dawn, the weather appeared sufficiently improved to consider departing the finger. However, during the long night, fuel had drained aft from the forward cell, leaving an insufficient amount required for engine start. Therefore, for thirty minutes, Chris drained fuel from the lower sumps into a small container and dumped the contents into the forward filler

⁵ No-Man's-Land: Most pilots used this generic term as synonymous with enemy territory. The only safe terrain was considered that which government forces physically occupied.

port. With the gray light of early morning false dawn beginning to define trees, hills, and objects around him, Captain Mike managed to start the engine.

Suddenly, all hell broke loose. Over the throaty chugging of nine pistons slapping cylinder walls in the cold engine, shots and shouts rang out. Alarmed, Mike yelled at Chris, whom he had last seen standing fireguard at the left side of the aircraft near the exhaust stacks. Now Chris and the passengers had disappeared.

Then a rifle round shattered the windscreen. Bullets began tearing through the cockpit. When Mike saw his blue helmet, perched on top of the console, "dancing wildly about," he decided it was past time to vacate his exposed position in the cockpit. Since the rotors were not yet engaged, he simultaneously jerked the mixture control lever to idle-cut-off, snapped the magneto switch off, and attempted to leap from the open window. Now, the sneaky, ugly, omni-present Murphy appeared, perpetrating what often occurred to a hurried pilot when under extreme duress. During Marshall's endeavor to escape harm's way, his long right leg became entangled under the seat, leaving him hanging precariously out the window. Exerting great effort, he managed to reenter the cockpit and raise the seat pan to free his trapped leg. He then plummeted eight feet to the ground. Had it been a grade B movie, it would have been more amusing to observe the six foot four inch Texan swan dive through the air, miraculously managing to clear the right landing gear. Stunned, but unhurt, he thought, *"What the hell is going on? Where is the firing coming from? God, what noise!"*

Later characterizing himself as being "scared shitless," he initially hid behind one of the large bales of cloth lying beside the aircraft. Partially on his knees, and hugging the deck, he scrambled downslope toward the rear of the aircraft.

Looking back over his left shoulder, he spied Crisologo in a clear area thirty feet in front of the helicopter. Then Chris raised his left hand to his chest and looked at it. From less than a hundred-feet, it appeared to Mike that a dark substance resembling blood covered the Filipino's hand. Somewhat confused, Mike momentarily glanced at the ground, trying to collect his thoughts and decide his next course of action. When he looked back toward the front of the H-34, Chris had disappeared.

With his Flight Mechanic no longer visible, and aware that he should immediately distance himself from the large green target, Marshall charged down the side of the ridge to find concealment in the high Kuni grass. ⁶ Then he heard a loud explosion. Poking his head above the saw-toothed grass, he observed greasy, black smoke rising above his ship. Exacting a heavy toll, enemy rifle fire had ignited the volatile fuel, blowing most of the helicopter to smithereens.

Seeking improved cover and concealment further away from danger, Mike proceeded 200-feet downhill. Then, spying a thick stand of bamboo, he backtracked to the spot. There he scraped out a small depression, crawled into it, covered himself with vegetation, and nervously waited for the rest of the drama to unfold. It was 0700 hours Asian time.

Marshall continued to hear shooting and shouting for several hours and surmised the enemy unit was searching for Chris, the Meo troops, and himself. Then there was total silence. Sometime after noon, the clouds began dissipating.

SAR

Before dawn, Captain Gary Malmberg, First Officer Les Strouse, and Kicker Carl Setower departed Vientiane in a Caribou

⁶ Depending on the individual and country he was in, this razor-sharp vegetation was also called elephant or saw-tooth grass.

to commence a search for Marshall. From his past SAR experience, Malmberg was considered an expert. By sheer deduction, he approximated the missing helicopter's location. Following a lengthy search, somewhat delayed by adverse weather, the crew discovered the burned helicopter, but were discouraged from further search by desultory fire from a nearby village.

Leaving to refuel, they called Vientiane, providing UMT coordinates for T-28 suppression. However, following the Air Attache's (AIRA) strict rules of engagement (ROE), the Thai B Team pilots were reluctant to bomb the village. Instead, they delivered their ordnance one hundred meters outside the site.

While refueling at Vientiane, Les Strouse explained the situation to some Air Commando friends, persuading them to load twenty pound fragmentation bombs in the Caribou. Once again in the SAR area, they began throwing bombs from the rear of the plane, which caused the bad guys to cease firing at them.⁷

During the early afternoon, H-34 Captain Sam Jordan flew over the heap of white ash and fire-blackened site. Customer Terry Burke accompanied Sam in the left cockpit. Colonel Tong, Houa Moug's (LS-58) military Commanding Officer, was in the cabin section. Sam was familiar with the area. Aware of Marshall's destination, he attempted to visualize the likely area where he had disappeared. To expedite and narrow the search, he drew a large rectangle on his map. During subsequent passes, the rectangle receded until the wreckage was spotted.⁸

While Sam commenced a right circling turn over the site, Burke observed the remains of the burned helicopter on a knoll.

⁷ Les Strouse Taped Interview, Bangkok, Thailand, 12/24/96.

⁸ Although Sam Jordan disputes this version today, local folklore had the crew directed to search another area, but Tong, utilizing his uncanny powers, cherished Buddhas, and other talismans, directed Sam close to Hotel-13.

A mostly intact tail pylon displayed Hotel-13's small black identification. Terry never saw Marshall, but while investigating a nearby village, he thought he detected groundfire.

Jordan then spotted Marshall moving uphill. However, not confident that he could safely land on the slope with the heavy load, he flew ten kilometers south to the lightly populated village of Na Khang (LS-36). There, on the overgrown strip, he deposited two fuel drums and other excess weight. More than seven hundred pounds lighter, he then returned to the Marshall site. Unable to discover a flat spot that would accommodate his H-34, he opted to land at the bottom of the hill, on a relatively level area, in tall elephant grass, thirty yards to the west. During two reconnaissance passes prior to landing, Burke had confirmed fire coming from around the village, so he returned suppressive Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR) fire from the cabin section.

Hearing a helicopter and anticipating rescue, Mike's heart hammered wildly as he surged up the slope and climbed on top of the still warm engine, while vigorously waving his white T-shirt at the H-34 crew.⁹ Then he watched in utter disbelief as the helicopter disappeared to the south. Disillusioned, he retreated to his former place of cover and concealment.

Jordan hovered and cautiously landed at the foot of the hill. Burke and Tong then leaped out and headed uphill toward the remains of Hotel-13. Impeded by head-high, thick saw grass, progress was excruciatingly slow. To provide better mobility, Burke flopped down on the grass, cradling his rifle. Colonel Tong stepped on and over his back and then lay down. They

⁹ Mondello later told Mike he thought the apparition he saw that day was a ghost.

repeated the process of flattening the grass and leapfrogging forward until reaching the site after about thirty minutes. During the rigors of fighting his way uphill through heavy grass and brush, Tong lost his prized Buddhist images and talismans. With little time to waste, and inherent danger still prevalent, he departed without looking for them. ¹⁰

Reaching the vestiges of Hotel-13, Burke discovered Mike's charred helmet among the ashes. Since no human remains were evident in the immediate area, he deduced that it had not been a crash and burn situation. The men then heard small arms fire nearby, and concluded that enemy troops were approaching them from the village.

Circling below them, Sam's ship was apparently drawing the ground fire. Unexpectedly, he popped to the top of the hill, coming to a dangerously low cross slope hover, while Flight Mechanic "Blacky" Mondello excitedly waved for Terry and Tong to board. Burke boosted Tong to the door, then chinned himself into the cabin. He nearly fell back to the ground upon seeing Mike Marshall grinning at him from a prone position on the plywood deck.

During all the confusion, Mike had failed to observe the rescue team ascending the hill through the heavy vegetation. Concerned that the helicopter pilot might again depart without him, he charged directly down the grassy slope, following an animal trail toward the engine and rotor blade noise. Breaking into a clearing he was confronted by "Blackie" pointing a BAR at him. Exhausted, Marshall hurled his bloodied and tattered uniformed body through the opening and into the yawning, welcome

¹⁰ Mike always intended to obtain a religious replacement at a wat, have it blessed, and give it to Tong but he never did. Rightly or wrongly, he believes to this day that the loss had great bearing on later events involving Tong and occurring during June 1965.

jaws of the cabin section. With Mike safely onboard, and troubled by the increasing groundfire, Sam repositioned near Hotel-13's pile of ashes to retrieve the rest of the team.

A former Marine, Burke carried a trusty BAR, which he attached to the cabin door with a cargo strap for ease of action. While Sam made a sweeping search of the area for Crisologo, Burke fired at the village and people moving up the hill. Finally, with all his magazines expended, and finding no trace of the Flight Mechanic, they flew a short distance to Houa Moung, where Caribou Captain Tony Durrizi patiently waited on the 1,400-foot strip to ferry survivors to Udorn.

A Company first aid truck drove Marshall to Operations where he was debriefed. Then the Air America doctor examined him for injuries.

CHRIS

Search and Rescue efforts continued for Crisologo and the Meo troops early on the 9th. Adverse weather and unknown enemy disposition hampered the search. Management representative, Captain Scratch Kanach, flew upcountry. Captain Billy Zeitler, also scheduled for a Long Tieng RON with recent hire Lou McCasland, was assigned to standby in the Vientiane Air America radio room until further notice. Billy believed Delta (LS-15), nearly a hundred miles closer to the action, would have provided a far better launch site, but believing the radio at Ban Na was not operational, he did not question his superior's decision.

Billy listened patiently to the SAR's progress for several hours until Ambassador Leonard Unger's representative entered the room and instructed the radio operator to recall all rescue aircraft. Upon hearing the recall message, Kanach replied that he and the pilots flying aircraft under his control were not standing down. They would continue to search until Crisologo was

discovered either alive or dead. Informed that the recall was at the behest of the ambassador, Kanach repeated that he was not abandoning the search--"Out." ¹¹ Zeitler was shocked at Kanach's declaration, for it would certainly be passed to Unger, but he was also immensely proud of Scratch's persistence.

Sam Jordan eventually discovered Crisologo in a deep valley, fifty yards downslope from where he had walked to obtain water from a mountain spring. As always, Air America pilots' "can do" attitude prevailed that day. Under Scratch Kanach's superior leadership, Chris and all the Meo personnel were recovered alive. However, Chris and one of the Meo lads were wounded. On the morning of the attack, an enemy bullet had struck Chris in the shoulder. The round nicked his lung. Because of the injury's severity, and assuming a survival mode, he had been unable to make his presence known to the rescue team the previous day.

Chief Pilot Wayne Knight's contribution during the two-day SAR was strictly as an observer-coordinator, and facilitator from the confines of his office and radio room. Whatever implications Kanach's words might have had with Ambassador Unger, there were never any recriminations lodged with Knight. Scratch performed as Wayne expected, and all were elated in Udorn by the successful conclusion to a potentially deadly outcome.

When Marshall later encountered his Flight Mechanic, he and Chris both remarked that they thought the other one had

¹¹ After the fact, Scratch and Terry Burke agreed that "radio problems" had prevented them from fully understanding the ambassador's recall message.

succumbed during the attack. ¹²

A Meo patrol eventually captured the Pathet Lao team responsible for the mayhem. The two men and two women in the unit divulged their portion of the story prior to their departure from this world.

When Mike returned upcountry on the 21st, Vang Pao apologized profusely to him because the officer assigned to the ship had cowardly bugged out, leaving him subject to enemy designs. Attempting to be pleasant and avoid animosity, Mike replied that the confused situation had mandated that every person look out for himself. Later, when the red beret lieutenant, a small individual who spoke good English, saw Mike, he turned white as a sheet and acted peculiar. Perhaps he believed Mike was another mountain spirit returned to haunt him. To reestablish rapport, Mike shook his hand, attempting to cheer him up regarding his part in the unfortunate incident.

Normally jumpy in the cockpit, the incident intensified Marshall's anxiety, and he never felt comfortable again working upcountry. Finally, deciding he had experienced enough Lao fun and games to last a lifetime, in October, he, Kay, and baby Neal departed Air America for CONUS

The episode, the first of its kind involving the successful recovery of a helicopter crew during my tenure, soon became standard fare, remaining only a bitter, fading memory.

In Vientiane, Flight Information Center (FIC) personnel were highly concerned about the incident. Citing details, they

¹² Long after Chris recovered his health and was allowed to fly again, he informed the Author that to avoid capture or death, he had buried himself in a depression. Throughout that night and part of the next day, the tough individual applied broad-leafed foliage to his shoulder to cool the wound and stem the bleeding. How could anyone not love and admire such a gutsy person as Chris?

informed their ATOG boss of an urgent requirement to obtain freer access to all Customer information sources. ¹³

¹³ Segment Sources:

Mike Marshall Letters, 03/07/89, 03/21/89.
Marshall; Emails, 08/13/99, 03/02/04.
Terry Burke Emails 02/27/04, 03/01/04.
Bill Zeitler Taped Interview, 09/01/01.
Joan McCasland's Diary.
EW Knight Emails, 06/29/00, 03/29/01.
FIC to ATOG, 08/04/64.
Bill Leary 1964 Notes, UTD.

With four additional Marine UD-34Ds scheduled to arrive in Udorn, the helicopter pilot pipeline door opened wide, albeit briefly, for the first time in years. Consequently, the first of three former Marine Corps helicopter aviators hired since Marius Burke more than a year before, arrived in Udorn toward the end of June. A balding Art White, who looked much like actor Yul Brynner, was naturally called "Ule." Like Marius, in addition to possessing H-34 experience, they all had logged substantial fixed wing time.

Second in the group, Lou McCasland, had planned to teach school after graduating from Sul Ross State College in Texas, but had received a military draft notice in the spring of 1959. Instead of being drafted, he opted to join the U.S. Marine Corps as an Aviation Officer Candidate (AOC). Like me, but at a later time, Lou trained at the Officer Candidate School at Quantico, Virginia, the Naval Training Command at Pensacola, Florida, and was assigned to the Marine Corps Air Facility, New River, Jacksonville, North Carolina. He served tours in the Dominican Republic and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Returning to New River, he discovered that he had been transferred to the HMM-263 squadron that was rotating to Futema, Okinawa. Lou spent one night in Okinawa and then boarded a GV-1 (C-130) for Udorn to relieve my squadron HMM-261. With the flap complete, the squadron only remained in Thailand a short time, and then boarded the USS *Valley Forge* for Subic Bay, Philippine Islands. After a few months at Cubi Point, the squadron departed for Oki. They spent only three hours at Futema, when the squadron was ordered back aboard ship, which was one hundred miles out to sea steaming for Cubi Point. The Cuban Missile Crises quelled their Okinawa fun.

During January 1963, HMM-263 relieved a squadron in Danang, South Vietnam. While there, Lenny Demko, a Training Command MARCAT second lieutenant I knew through Connie Barsky at New River, was involved in an accident.

Lenny and Major David Webster were assigned to a rescue mission in the mountains west of Danang for Mohawk Army pilots. The confined crash area, located at a very high altitude, was hot and humid. While attempting to lift one of the pilots out, the density altitude proved too much for the H-34, and settling with power ensued, resulting in another crash. Darkness prevailed before the squadron could mount another rescue. Webster died that night from injuries incurred, and a badly burned Demko was rescued the following morning.

Because of a dislocated left knee while playing softball at the Royal Thai Army compound, I was lying on a cot waiting to rotate early to Okinawa on a Marine GV (C-130). Lenny entered the tent and bumped my outstretched, ace-bandaged appendage. The pain was so intense I could hardly stand it, and cursed my fellow Marine all the way to the plane.

Major Demko returned to Vietnam in 1968 with HMM-364. While flying a CH-46, he was shot down during a medical rescue attempt. This time he was not so fortunate.

Following the six-month assignment, Lou McCasland returned to Santa Anna, California, to complete his military obligation. Toward the end of the year, his commanding officer asked him to extend his military tour. Lou considered this offer, if he could either go to Monterey and work on a master's degree, or be assigned to a fixed wing squadron. It is a fact that persons who serve in the U.S. military are at the mercy of "needs of the service." Consequently, they rarely receive what they ask for, and Lou was informed that after another six months instructing he would be sent back to Vietnam. That settled the issue.

While considering options in the civilian job market, McCasland applied for helicopter employment with Air America. Interviewing was solely conducted by telephone. Lou informed Personnel Director "Red" Dawson that he had first learned about the Company while serving at Udorn in July 1962. His timing was perfect and he was hired.

While still in the service, Lou had met Joan in Santa Anna, where she was teaching school. They were married in her hometown of Birmingham, Michigan. Well before the event, Lou had queried Dawson about the prospect of his prospective wife accompanying him to Thailand. "Red" indicated, as per Company personnel regulations, that Lou would have to complete a probation period before the Company would send her to Southeast Asia. Lou then inquired if there was an alternative to the policy. He learned that she could accompany him, but he would be responsible for all her expenses. This was fine with Lou, and he forwarded necessary information to Washington to process the paperwork and obtain passports and visas. In the meantime, General Dawson discovered that Joan was a teacher and telephoned Lou asking if his wife was interested in a job. After the school was completed, interested Air America wives taught their children there from Calvert correspondence courses. Now in the process of expanding, Air America considered employing a qualified teacher to set up and head a curriculum for dependent children. Lou and Joan talked it over and agreed to the proposal.

The McCaslands departed their wedding reception for Detroit to board a westbound plane. The couple stayed the first night in Los Angeles. Traveling first class courtesy of Air America, the airline provided a large wedding cake and the stewardess' warbled a song. They shared the cake with all the passengers. After landing in Hawaii, they enjoyed three honeymoon days at

the Royal Hawaiian Hotel before proceeding to the Far East. Arriving in Japan, they rested at the Tokyo Imperial Hotel.

As other Americans had experienced while traveling to the Far East, amenities and coordination began to breakdown the further along the pipeline one progressed. While staying at the Prince Hotel during the Taipei check in process, an air disaster occurred killing many Chinese dignitaries.

A week after their marriage, they arrived in Bangkok and overnighted at the Plaza Hotel. Following a hurried breakfast on the Fourth of July, a Company bus driver transported them to the airport. The ten o'clock milk run was full, so they waited until a Caribou became available to fly them to Udorn. There they met Wai Ying and Billy Pearson, Marilyn and Jack Connors, Charlie Weitz, and others.

A party was in progress in the compound. Several military personnel drinking in the Club bar, inspired by considerable liquid courage, talked about qualifying for jump pay. Captains Pearson, Ed Reid, and Jack Connors also wanted to participate. Therefore, a H-34 flight was arranged and all headed for the parking ramp. Billy P, a former Army Ranger, dressed in shorts and shower shoes, donned a parachute. Since it was Connors first parachute experience, Billy P and Ed tried to discourage him from the jump. A Det-6 Waterpump medic known to everyone as "Spider Webb" joined the group. Webb jumped at every opportunity. Barefooted, he liked to bail low with a shower shoe tucked under each armpit, which he ritualistically placed on his feet in the descent.

On this day, they exited the helicopter from about 2,000 feet AGL over the grass median between the runway and taxiway. Following them down in his H-34, Dick Elder landed nearby while the participants rolled up their chutes and climbed into the

cabin section. After Dick landed on the parking ramp, they returned to the bar.

Lou and Joan stayed in the Club overnight quarters for three days. They found the accommodations crowded, and one had to share a common bathroom. Joan talked to Ben Moore several times regarding the teaching billet. For a time the two were unable to agree on a proper salary, as the Company only offered 400 dollars a month initially to teach eight grades. After dickering for almost two months, the Company offered adequate remuneration for her to teach seven grades with fifteen students.

Billy P and Wai Ying assisted the McCaslands with many small items that confronted new employees. Jim Rhyne and Bob Hamblin graciously departed their bungalow in the Chet compound for a new place across town, and the Pearsons arranged for the McCaslands to rent the adjacent property. After they moved into the furnished abode, Joan had Wai Ying's maid wash the *Playboy* images off the wall that Charlie Weitz had painted when he lived there.

Charlie still lived in the compound. He had Mister Chet build a two-story house directly opposite the two original bungalows. The outside was unique, in that a large Playboy Bunny logo graced the exterior facade. The display adequately publicized Charlie's lusty appetites.

Consistent with standard management policy, Lou flew an acceptance check with Wayne on the seventh. Afterward he was released for his upcountry familiarization. All former Marine pilots that Air America hired possessed verifiable H-34

experience.¹

Lou would have no problem with any aspect of the H-34 program, for he had spent a year as an instructor pilot in HMM-362 at Santa Anna. During that time, he transitioned a few senior jet pilots into helicopters. He found this duty interesting and a bit playful. Hoping to obtain a newbie's attention, Lou hovered at 5,000 feet, moved sideways, and backed up. Then he informed the pilot how easy it was to fly a helicopter and relinquished the controls to the new man. After the pilot decided he was spastic and a complete idiot, the PIC performed a vertical autorotation to a full landing. The indoctrination was appropriate. From that point on, the former jet jockey was very curious. Amazed at the helicopter's capability, he appreciated the difficulty of operating one.

Lou left on his first upcountry RON on the ninth with Bill Zeitler. After Scratch Kanach retrieved Crisologo, they proceeded to Long Tieng. They were assigned to conduct shuttles and continue beefing up the western flank around San Luang in anticipation of the start of Operation Triangle. Lou considered Billy Z an excellent pilot and they had a great time challenging each other to precision take-offs and landings.

On Tuesday, they worked for several hours east of Bouam Long at the new Meo site of Houie Sa An (LS-27) that had replaced adjacent LS-23 and which bore the same name.

McCasland very quickly formed a positive opinion of Udorn pilots and Flight Mechanics. Over time, he considered the pilots

¹ When H-34 pilots were in demand later, a few Army people, dishonest regarding their qualifications and total flight time in the ship, were hired. Unfortunately, this deceit resulted in at least one tragedy.

a most professional group of aviators. ² Lou had enjoyed the Marine Corps, but he harbored strong issues with some of the missions flown in Vietnam. He conceded that the experience and skill level of Marine Corps helicopter aviators was not on a par with Air America pilots. He believed that one of the best features of the job was individual choice that allowed personal decisions of what to do and how to perform a mission. Such an opportunity was not an option in the military, for one was instructed what to do, could not evaluate the risk involved, and was not allowed to make a personal decision.

There were six H-34s and sixteen Captains at the facility when McCasland arrived in Udorn. He believed that the Air America complex was adequate for the mission at the time. He appreciated not having to deal with or associate with the local Customer, for he was not interested in who they were, or the nature of their mission. He enjoyed the atmosphere at the Air America facility and considered himself well suited for the job. Raised in far West Texas, a region with very few people, he learned early to assume responsibility and respect authority. He did not accept employment to get killed, but to perform a job for adequate pay. He enjoyed the myriad of decisions inherent in the job and never shied away from making one. He respected the chain of command, and attempted to produce maximum effort for the money he earned. ³

² Before upgrading to Captain at the end of August, Lou flew with a cross section of former Army and Marine pilots including: Bill Zeitler, Don Buxton, Scratch Kanach, Marius Burke, and Sam Jordan.

³ Lou McCasland Emails, 05/17/00, 09/08/00 (2), 09/10/00, 09/13/00, 09/14/00 (2), 09/16/00, 06/07/01.
Lou McCasland Flight Time Record, July 1964.
Joan McCasland Personal Diary.

A third pilot to arrive in the same time frame was former Marine Captain, Steve Stevens (DOH 07/05/64). Stevens had previously worked at HMX Quantico flying a VIP-configured UH-34D as a Presidential helicopter pilot. Derived from Greek heritage, Steve sported a beautiful and luxurious handlebar mustache. Not long after Steve arrived, Ben Moore, while sitting in his captain's chair on the operations screened porch surveying his domain, spotted the new pilot. Figuring he would establish a precedent for all employees and square this new pilot away, while affecting a Texas drawl, Moore immediately began quoting U.S. Navy regulations concerning the necessity of wearing a *"neatly trimmed moustache not beyond the edge of the lips."* There was also a haircut and beard policy tucked away in the Air America personnel manual, which specified the same trim. After a run in with a scruffy looking Bill Cook, Moore had posted a memorandum quoting the regulation and reminding crewmembers about maintaining a neat, clean appearance. Some considered the memo just another form of Company harassment, but with the advent of standard uniforms and regulations such as these, employees had come a long way from the unkempt Cowboy type image of earlier years.

Steve had worn and nurtured his flowing, well cared for mustache for as long as he could remember. He was not going to part with his personal friend, so he merely ignored Ben's counsel and that ended the flap. ⁴

Although Ben never totally approved of facial hair, he most likely let the subject drop because of Steve's outstanding

⁴ Steve Stevens Email, 04/08/01.

demeanor, and the program's overwhelming requirement for flight personnel.⁵

I for one was amazed that he was able to counteract a management decision, but perhaps we were in the process of entering a new phase in the Madriver operation.

Steve began training with Wayne on the 13th.

His arrival into our tiny fold was like a breath of fresh air, at a particularly tense and critical time in our operation, as the expanding war and SAR duty had placed us all on edge. While imbibing with us in the Club bar, Steve contributed an assortment of welcome humor to lift our flagging morale with his never-ending jokes. He also performed hilarious acts in pantomime, like the one-armed piccolo player. Later, after upgrading to Captain, on 7 December, he broke the boredom of the moment upcountry by proclaiming over FM radio net, "*Happy Pearl Harbor Day.*" This cracked up all those who heard the greeting, particularly since Steve's wife, Michico, was Japanese.⁶

Bob Nunez, a fourth pilot, arrived in late July. The Company usually attempted to maintain a two and a half pilot ratio to man one H-34. In theory, this provided sufficient personnel to allow for sickness, leave, scheduled time off, and one pilot to cover the machine. Bob was an unusual choice by the Washington office in that he was the first former Air Force pilot hired for our program since Dick Elder in 1961. In addition, although having worked for New York Airways flying turbine engine CH-46 airport shuttles, he had no UH-34D helicopter or mountain experience. Wayne flew an acceptance check ride with Bob on the 25th and decided it would probably

⁵ Although now a gray topper, Stevens still proudly wears his badge of honor.

⁶ EW Knight Emails, 03/29/01, 03/31/01.

require many hours to bring Nunez up to the required Captain proficiency.

The monsoon season seriously curtailed gainful employment for many Northeast Thai men. This affected farmers more than other job categories. Therefore, still obligated to provide for their families, some arrived in Udorn town to assume the role of temporary thieves.

Not long after I returned from the last RON, Caesar partially redeemed himself from his abysmal watchdog stigma by chasing a suspected quemoy away from beneath the house. Thieves were active throughout the town. During the same period, three thieves invaded a pilot's house one night. With his wife, two children, himself, and the maid in residence, the bad guys had enough gall to enter the family bedroom looking for money and valuables. Pre-advised how to safely react in such a situation, feigning sleep, no one moved, so there was no messy confrontation.

THE ALTERNATE FOOD FUND

I began publicizing and explaining the viability of a Long Tieng food fund among our group. Using my own words, I culled the original concept from Tony's reasoning. Without unduly forcing the subject on interested parties, I only touted the agenda while at the airfield. However, the word quickly spread, and within a short time I was pleasantly surprised by the idea's general acceptance. By the 17th after collecting one hundred baht per individual, or a firm commitment from those present and interested in participating, I had collected 1,400 baht. Anxious to initiate a first shipment, I recalled Tony's request for basic items. Using Elder's authority and influence at the gazebo Country Store, I purchased Ajax, Cheer detergent, paper napkins

and towels, coffee, tea, and Ovaltine to forward upcountry on the first available H-34.

Although I kept a list, all contributions were confidential, strictly voluntary, and I made the decision not to badger any underpaid Filipino Flight Mechanics unless they chose to contribute to the fund. Thirteen of the sixteen Captains initially participated: Don Buxton, Jack Connor, Dick Elder, Bill Cook, Mike Marshall, Bill Zeitler, Tom Moher, Marius Burke, Julian Kanach, Bill Pearson, Howard Estes, Wayne Knight, and Dick Casterlin. Ed Reid and Charlie Weitz were not available. First Officers Lou McCasland, Art White, and Steve Stevens chipped in from the beginning. Seeing merit in the food fund, Flight Mechanics Joe Marlin, Stan Wilson, and Carl Gabel also contributed.

Except for a local test flight of Hotel 15 on the 11th with Ben Naval, I did not fly for some time.⁷

In the meantime, my annual leave approval arrived from Taipei. After almost two years without a break, I was indeed ready for time off in the "real world."

KUALA LUMPUR

I was still interested in Jim Coble's Kuala Lumpur project, and often inquired about it when visiting Knight's office. He mentioned that Marius, already an investor, planned a trip to Malaysia and suggested I accompany him. Unhappy over SAR duty, and more aware of my mortality during the past month, I was almost ready to commit funds to the new venture, and agreed to make the trip. Wayne arranged a few days off the schedule for

⁷ Shaken by what happened to Chris Crisologo during the Marshall saga, Ben Naval, like several other Filipinos, needed a break and no longer flew upcountry.

us, and after arranging tickets (127.70 dollars roundtrip) through the Civil Air Transport office on the corner of Suriwongse and Pat Pong roads, and obtaining 250 dollars from the moneychanger, we left Don Muang Airport on Tuesday the 21st.

We stayed at Jim Coble's spacious villa that included a maid. Jim said that such lavish quarters were necessary to enhance his image as a manager. He appeared to be living quite well, perhaps too grandly for a fledgling company. Over a couple of days, we discovered that Coble had indeed been busy. Through the Australia-Malaysia Corporation (AMCOR), an Aussie marketing company run by Basil Rossi and the auspices of a local prince, who was chosen as an investor for his political contacts, two sites had been selected for the projected cement block factory, and a Besser Vibropac that was awaiting shipment from the USA. Pending factory location, erection, and machine installation, the first block production was projected for late September.

The company was registered with the government and a project cost analysis of the project was complete. Asian American Investment Corporation, Limited (AMCOR) was actually a holding company, which included a small interest in AMCOR, Concrete Masonry, and a future re-conditioning waste oil company

Coble, adept at the gift of gab, regaled us with glorious plans. However, he became pathetically quiet when I asked him to produce current company records for examination. Of course, none were available. ⁸

Having worked summers in various construction jobs while going to college, I had an affection for the building business, and envisioned enormous potential in a well-run company.

⁸ Perhaps I asked too many difficult questions while in Kuala Lumpur, for I later heard from another investor that Jim frowned on me visiting again. He referred to me in a derogatory manner referring to my sierra-eating grin.

However, never haven been friends with Coble, and thus objective in accessing the company's potential, I was not enamored with Coble's blarney, methods, or those of his blatantly overly ambitious wife, Bonnie. There was also a disturbingly, unsubstantiated rumor circulating Air America indicating that Coble had never actually invested a reputed 20,000 dollars in the company. Despite being aware that many people, particularly Vientiane fixed wingers, disliked Jim, after talking with AMCOR people, I discounted much of the gossip. Australian Basil Rossi, who purportedly specialized in assembling new companies, and his assistant, English engineer Ted Baily-Reynolds, both seemed like highly competent and extraordinarily frank individuals, who just might steer Coble on the right path to success. Therefore, in the likelihood that the venture would prosper and to avoid missing a potential windfall, I committed 10,000 dollars.

Upon our return to Udorn, I briefed Wayne about what had transpired in Kuala Lumpur and my reservations concerning Coble's deficient accounting and managerial capabilities. Then I went home and discovered Diane Elder's motorbike missing. At first I visualized another theft. However, when queried, Sang indicated that someone from Elder's house had retrieved the bike. I thought it strange, as Dick had never indicated that he wanted the bike returned. Queried, Dick said that Sang was seen driving the machine about town and this had angered Diane. I was never certain of the actual reason, but assumed that the couple might be worried about another real or contrived theft. The loss of transportation seriously curtailed or slowed my activity, but Sang ran a tight ship. Utilizing samlor transportation, she kept the house stocked with food for the dog and me. I remained home a lot and enjoyed the quiet area. If bored, I journeyed into town on busses to the USIS library located on the corner across from City Park to read dated *Wall Street Journals* and magazines.

This required time, but proved a safe and economical method of traversing Udorn town. When going to the Air America compound to check the mail and schedule, or eat, I bummed rides on Company trucks, or busses, or flagged down anyone who happened by on Thahan Tanon.

For a Westerner still relatively uninitiated to Thai culture, some interesting events occasionally occurred on Soi Wat Po. Except for neighbors, until the heat of the day drove me inside off the porch, I observed a few people wandering along our dirt road. One morning, as I watched the street from my hard wooden chair, a thin, middle-aged woman ambled past the house.⁹ Assuming that she was unobserved, and heeding an immediate call of nature, she stopped in the middle of the road. Unaware that a curious farang was watching, she casually squatted and modestly arranged her sarong in a circle around her body. After a short time, she rose, brushed herself off, and rearranged her clothing. Then, peering at the ground, she retrieved a stick and began vigorously probing whatever she had deposited on the ground. Her stabbing motions continued for some time. Then, with a sniff of indifference, she patted the hair bun behind her head and continued down the road. The performance was a new experience for me, but I was well aware of the region's hookworm infestation among the population.

This would be the first to admit that modesty was a common denominator in their society. One never saw lovers holding hands, kissing in public, or similar displays of affection between people of opposite genders. Furthermore, except for those of the same sex, Thai friends rarely touched each other. Even the Wai greeting, a folding of the hands in front of the

⁹ It was quite difficult for most Westerners to determine an Asian woman's age.

chest, replaced western handshaking. As to other delicate issues relating to bodily elimination, public facilities were not always available. Therefore, it was common to see a samlor driver squatting and facing a roadside fence, while urinating. The first time I observed this, recalling the difficulty of using a relief tube in the H-34 cockpit, I wondered at the complexity of the task and thought it extremely poor form for those living in what was supposed to be a civilized city. However, I soon realized that it was a normal and generally accepted function, expertly performed with nothing exposed. I never attempted to duplicate the practice, but came to realize that natural expressions such as sex, bodily functions, and the like were more readily acceptable in the East--particularly in the rural areas.

TRIANGLE DEMANDS

Stating that Operation Triangle's requirements would necessitate increased helicopter demand, Ambassador Unger continued to lobby State for additional H-34s. Envisioning augmented Yankee Team reconnaissance during the operation, the request for more helicopters included provisions for increased SAR standby. He went on to indicate that a projected transfer of a second H-34 to the RLA to evacuate wounded would make it impossible to assign H-34s from the present Air America inventory for SAR standby. With the recent loss of Hotel-13 and another in IRAN (heavy maintenance), the helicopter inventory would be greatly reduced.

Supporting his claims, Unger revealed that CINCPAC recognized the critical need for additional helicopters, and urged delivery from CONUS stocks. He emphasized that four ships were immediately required, and if the full complement could not

be provided, then delivery of two was acceptable with the remainder to follow. ¹⁰

On the 20th, just before Marius and I departed Kuala Lumpur for Thailand, the first three of four promised H-34s began arriving in Thailand. Consistent with sequential numbering of the additional aircraft, the bailed USMC helicopters were designated Hotels-20 through 22. Even though they were recently out of overhaul and reputed to be in top condition, Company mechanics conducted meticulous airframe and static system inspections in the hangars before releasing them for test flights. Beginning on Tuesday and continuing through the 29th, Wayne and Scratch spent many hours in the cockpits during the acceptance-airworthiness checks. During test and upcountry shakedowns, the new machines were used to good advantage training recent arrivals White, Stevens, and Nunez. ¹¹

¹⁰ Leonard Unger to State, 07/13/64.

¹¹ EW Knight Email, 03/25/01.

Following enemy attacks against FAN positions on the Plain of Jars in April 1963, ARMA and AIRA representatives were authorized to participate in military activities exceeding those normally required by U.S. Embassy Attaches acting in an advisory role. During the summer of that year, attaché ranks increased. After Pathet Lao attacks commenced in earnest during May 1964, numbers of U.S. military personnel again increased to advise and support the Moung Soui Neutralists and the Triangle operation.

Triangle was scheduled to commence by 6 July. However, toward the end of the first week and into the second of July, fierce monsoon rainstorms pounded lower Military Region Two, delaying the operation. The bad weather not only hindered predicting the start of the operation, it drastically curtailed T-28 strikes and other aircraft support.

Despite these delays, six American Requirements Office advisors and an assistant ARMA representative were on location at Moung Soui. Following a briefing regarding their duties, three assistant AIRA personnel assigned air operations duties at Moung Soui, Vang Vieng, and Luang Prabang departed the area for Udorn to await the start of the operation. Intelligence from spies noted continued enemy build-ups, numbering three Pathet Lao battalions in the Moung Soui area, with some indication of movement toward Sala Phou Khoun. ¹

Attempts to expand the civilian air force continued. Embassy Country Team proposed efforts to employ Air America pilots, flying more effective unmarked A1H-AD-6 planes from

¹ Vientiane Report, 07/08/64.
Green to Secretary Rusk, 10/01/64.

Danang, to sever Route-7 east of the Plain of Jars. However, a question arose of having sufficient proficient pilots to fulfill the mission within two days. There was also the issue of using easily recognizable and dissimilar aircraft, which, if noted by the enemy, might initiate additional political problems. Moreover, the message quoted reports from the Vientiane Ambassador and AIRA noting that it appeared, despite the risky operation, that there had been some success interdicting Route-7 using T-28s flown by Lao and Thai pilots. Therefore, T-28s remained the primary strike instrument.

It was pointed out that a serious emergency could arise at any time, and the delay in contacting Washington for approval to use the Alphas might prove disastrous. Therefore, the question of the ambassador using Air America pilots to fly T-28s at his discretion continued throughout the month. However, at this particular time, Bundy did not want to relinquish State Department control over American flown T-28s. ²

Monsoon weather patterns began improving by 11 July. Drying conditions allowed Air America crews to airlift an additional 180 GM-16 troops from Pakse and Attapeu to the muddy strip at Moung Soui by the 13th. The movement increased the total soldiers from the south to 300. With a major portion of the lift completed by the 15th, fixed wing crews were released to normal operations. Lao C-47s and Bird Lao-marked C-46s would begin resupply missions. Following a delay of twelve days, inconsistent troop movements set commencement of the operation back another estimated six days.

Before the operation commenced, White House advisors began harboring serious doubts regarding the scope of a comprehensive

² Priority Message from CINCPAC to JCS, 07/08/64.
Memorandum Bundy to Secretary Dean Rusk, 07/27/64.

Triangle success. Royal Lao Army delays pushed movement further back into an especially wet rainy season. This allowed leaks of plans, and created adequate time for the enemy to prepare counter measures. Reconnaissance was definitive as to enemy preparation. Strong Pathet Lao defensive positions, incorporating mines and roadblocks, were evident. It was believed that these would seriously impede friendly movement and hamper progress. However, vehicular movement along almost impassable roads had been factored into the equation, and T-28 pilots could generally work around bad weather and substitute for the lack of ground artillery. There were hedged bets that the enemy would attack Moung Soui from the east, but defenses had been strengthened considerably with artillery and Royal Thai Army units, which presented a formidable adversary. Therefore, there was some optimism that Site-108 would hold, unless the enemy committed additional forces than those presently deployed in the area.

On a political level, there was concern over the requested increase in visible attaché personnel and the plan to incorporate ARMA and AIRA advisors into each advancing government column. This would result in more American exposure than envisioned. In addition, the absence of Pathet Lao activity could make it difficult to influence world opinion that the operation was in defense of Moung Soui.

The telegram concluded saying that the operation should go forward with U.S. support, but should be executed in a method to avoid an over-extension of forces and **any attempt at full victory.** ³

³ Constrained operations continued to be the norm in Laos, so as not to unduly upset communist leaders, and foment an all out war, one the Lao could not win, and for which the U.S. was not prepared. This policy continued throughout the entire war.

Unger's boss concurred. Taking the role of a cheerleader, he believed the operation should be implemented in a **controlled manner**. Even limited success would be positive, as it would boost Lao morale and support for the shaky Neutralist government.

Any success was likely the paramount factor in the operation, for the volatile political situation in Vientiane continued unabated, with continuing reports of bickering over personal differences between Lao generals. This, plus the current Lao government structure, disgusted conservative junior officers who were ready to alter the status quo. Rumors circulated for days regarding coups. These accelerated on the 18th, but there were no signs on the streets of impending trouble and nothing occurred. The last alleged coup, slated to commence early on the 21st, never materialized.

On 4 August, General Phoumi Nosavan ordered his Vientiane-based replacement training battalion to stage a coup. Since the April coup attempt and erosion of his power base, he had been relegated to a back seat in planning. He was barely consulted regarding FAR participation in the joint July operation to retake Sala Phou Khoun and clear Route-13. Before the coup attempt amounted to anything, General Kouprasith's Military Region Five units quelled the uprising and Phoumi's units disbanded. ⁴

⁴ Segment Sources:

Leonard Unger, 07/13-14/64.

Note Bundy to Rusk, 07/14/64.

Memorandum John T. McNaughton, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, to Robert McNamara, 07/15/64.

Outgoing Telegram to Vientiane and Bangkok, 07/16/64.

Letter Bundy to CINCPAC, 07/16/64.

Telegram Rusk to Embassy Laos, #2057, 07/16/64.

CIA Intelligence Information, 07/18, /07/20/64.

Ken Conboy, 123.

Victor Anthony, 122.

On 16 July, a Pathet Lao infantry regimental force, supported by artillery units, attacked Moung Soui. T-28 pilots were instrumental in thwarting an advance. During periods of acceptable flying weather, T-28s continued to soften-up the Moung Soui area. On the 17th, they struck enemy positions around Phou Khout and southeast of Moung Soui. Newly reinforced by GM-16 troops, 105, 155mm artillery guns, and T-28 strikes, Lao forces counterattacked two days later. The enemy withdrew toward Phou Khout, where three companies dominated the high ground. Despite continuous airborne pounding, Pathet Lao units clung to positions on the northern peak.

Phou Khout's strategic location and military significance continued to weigh heavily on Moung Soui's defenses and future planning. The hill mass provided enemy units perfect observation and firing lanes that impacted FAN forward positions. The hill complex consisted essentially of three knobs, more than 1,500 feet apart. The highest one topped 1,300 feet above the surrounding terrain. The high ground also afforded access to the Moung Soui Valley and the ability to dominate surrounding ground, particularly to the east and southeast to Phou Keng, and a portion of the southern Plain of Jars terrain almost to Moung Kheung, and the western most Neutralist positions.

The strongly fortified and mined Pathet Lao positions near the top of Phou Khout, concealed by scrub pine, were difficult to target. Recognizing that enemy forces needed to be dislodged from the strategic mountain for Moung Soui's survival, over several days, FAN troops mounted three unsuccessful attempts to retake the hill. The third attack on 25 July was preceded by two days of heavy air strikes, and an assault that allegedly carried

to the crest of the hill. However, the spooked unit soon withdrew.

Failure to achieve the objective prompted the ambassador to request a sensitive napalm option preceding a fourth assault. The weapon's use had been previously sanctioned, then was put on hold, and was still under discussion. In the end, Washington disapproved this weapon as an escalatory move far out of proportion to more conventional measures.

Weather did not fully cooperate in Sam Neua Province. Flights targeted to strike Route-6 between Houa Moung (LS-58) and pressured Meo forces at Ban Hat Heng were diverted to a secondary position near Nong Het (LS-03). On the way home to base, RLAF aircraft observers noted an estimated enemy buildup of 300 vehicles and three battalions five miles southeast of Khang Khay.

With RF-101 reconnaissance planes revealing six additional AAA guns in the Ban Ban Valley, the mixed ethnic RLAF air force suffered losses. Indeed, since the first week in July, three T-28s, including one RLAF and one Thai pilot, were lost during air operations. Hoping to cripple the enemy potential to move men and supplies along Route-7 toward Moung Soui from the Ban Ban Valley, Barney Cochran planned a strike mission on the heavily defended main bridge spanning the Nam Mat. This was the same bridge that the Alphas had failed to drop in May. Cochran used Thai-generated photo reconnaissance to determine enemy AAA capability, and form the best tactics for the strike. The Det-6 Commanding Officer arranged to have delayed action fuses delivered to Udorn from 13th Air Force stocks. Eight Thai T-28 pilots would carry out the attack on 14 July. Four planes would first dive bomb the target. A second division would then follow low level with 500 pound delay fuse ordnance to take out bridge supports.

During the strike, the flight leader of the second division was shot down and killed. Another T-28 was damaged. None of the bombs exploded.

Another smaller bridge across the Nam Mat was attacked and mostly dropped on 18 July.

These and other actions left thirty four T-28s, with the exception of four reserved for training, available at the commencement of Triangle's ground operations.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff approved increased Yankee Team missions in the Moung Soui and Plain of Jars areas to support Triangle. They authorized one aircraft to fly low, and if enemy AAA guns threatened flights, discretionary retaliation could be employed by cover aircraft. Escorted by two fighters, recon missions were flown from 22 to 24 July between Moung Soui-Phou Khout, Moung Soui-Phou Khoun, and across the Plain of Jars to Ban Ban to garner targeting information. ^{5 6}

Final preparations for the ground portion of Triangle began on Sunday the 18th with GM-16 troops forming into route march units. The following morning, the battalion moved slowly out of Moung Soui toward Nam Tia, about ten air miles west on Route-7. The troops were accompanied by U.S. Army advisors, USAF air

⁵ Whoever was selected for Ban Na SAR standby during this period of increased activity must have chomped at the bit.

⁶ Segment Sources:
 Edward Greenhalgh, 59.
 AIRA Vientiane, 07/17/64.
 From CINCPAC, 07/18/64.
 CHECO.
 Leonard Unger, 07/23/64.
 Thompson of the National Security Council Staff to Bundy, 07/23/64.
 William Bundy, 07/24/64.
 National Security Files, Lao Country File, LBJ Library, 07/26/64.
 ARMA, Description of the Significance of Phou Khout, 07/29/64.
 Victor Anthony, 121-122.
 Bill Leary 1964 Notes, UTD.

liaison teams from Waterpump, and Lao forward air controllers (FAC). Flying two U-17s from Moung Soui and Vang Vieng, airborne support teams were charged with providing target information to USAF Air Liaison Officers (ALO) manning communication Jeeps. The ALO, in close coordination with the ground commanders, relayed requests to AIRA Commanding Officer Colonel Tyrell. Tyrell then contacted the Vientiane Air Operations Center (AOC), which scheduled T-28 missions.

During the first day of the offensive, Joe Potter, acting as a forward controller, flew in an Aero Commander. The ALO, Paddy Doyle, carried a plywood arrow which he pointed toward the enemy. Potter then directed T-28 pilots to targets using distances and azimuths from the arrow.

At the same time troops were marching from Moung Soui, GM-17 and elements of the FAN Vang Vieng garrison departed on an estimated three-day march to reach attack positions below the road bend at Ban Cheng. Their next planned objective was Moung Kassy. By Thursday, GM-16 was easily moving westward toward the first objective at Namchat (Tat). After delays, the Luang Prabang GM-11 regiment moved slowly down Route-13 toward Kiou Kacham (LS-04). Encountering little opposition, the battalions achieved the first objective, capturing some equipment and a few prisoners. Then they moved south to high ground on Phou Chia south of Site-04 and awaited further developments.

At Moung Soui, Thai specialists emplaced their artillery pieces in defensive positions calculated to withstand heavy enemy attacks should Triangle fail to achieve the anticipated results.

Unger requested discretionary authority from State to use

Alpha or Det-6 T-28 pilots should the need arise. ⁷

Jack Connor and Mike Marshall flew Hotel-15 to Sam Tong on the 21st, where Mike assumed control of Hotel-12 the following day. It was Mike's first trip upcountry since his ill-fated experience in upper Military Region Two earlier in the month. As previously stated, he never felt entirely comfortable working upcountry again. ⁸

Vang Pao continued preparations to fortify and protect Moung Soui's southern flank. The defensive line had a dual purpose. In doing so, he was also protecting Sam Tong and Long Tieng. There had been numerous reports of a Pathet Lao buildup west of the Plain of Jars, but Americans at Sam Tong did not consider this a serious threat. However, Vang Pao was not sure, and did not want to chance enemy movement toward his power base. Therefore, as stiffening the LS-41-LS-38 defense line was a priority, weather permitting, Mike continued to supply Ban San Luang. Then he began shuttling troops, ammo, and rice into Phou Da Pho perched in the mountainous Long Pot area. Site-103 was situated at the 4,300-foot level on hills that overlooked and sloped easterly down to the Nam Ngum. Located five miles southwest of Xieng Dat (LS-26), the site became the initial FAR supply base and jump off point for Meo guerrillas involved in Triangle's early phase. Lying hard against a ridgeline, the position anchored the westernmost portion of the Houei Ki Nin-

⁷ Operation Triangle Situation Reports, 07/18, 19, 22/64.
Ken Conboy, 111.
Victor Anthony, 125.
Bill Leary 1964 Notes, UTD.

⁸ Rick Decosta, then "Blackie Mondello, flew with Mike; no one canvassed Filipino Flight Mechanics as to what they thought while crewing with Marshall after Chris was wounded. Nevertheless, no one harbored illusions about the inherent dangers involved in working hostile areas; and as long as a person suppressed his fears and emotions, the job and its monetary rewards overcame personal feelings.

San Luang-Xieng Dat defensive line. From Site-103, Meo patrols or units ranged north toward the road to block expected Pathet Lao flanking movements. They were also in position to leapfrog at will in helicopters to commanding high ground along any portion of the road.

While working the area, I noted a few ancient stone jars with intact lids lying in high grass beside the normally disused dirt and grass strip. They stimulated my curiosity, for they appeared to be duplicates of ones described to me that were abundant on certain areas of the Plain of Jars. Apparently not many people knew they were there. After mentioning and seeking answers about the rare artifacts, none knew how the heavy jars had been transported to the remote site. Consisting of a different composition than local stone, they were obviously not hewn on site. Equivalent sandstone was located many miles away. Elephants still provided a time-honored method of moving heavy items in Laos and neighboring countries. Although generally relegated to aiding the timber industry in the present day, it was conceivable that in ancient times they were used to drag either the unfinished stones or the finished product to the PDJ. However, the few that were located in the hills at Phou Da Pho remained a mystery.

Another man-made adjunct to the area's wooded hills were scattered pieces of a silver plane wrecked while air dropping supplies in previous years. If conditions were right, the machine could be seen many miles away at altitude glinting in the sunlight.

On Friday morning, Wayne Knight flew Hotel-20, the first new addition to our fleet in a long time. After it was cleared and released in an airworthiness condition, he ferried the ship upcountry to swap with Hotel-12. Steve Stevens was along in a familiarization-training capacity. They met Mike Marshall at

Moung Soui, effected the exchange, and returned to Udorn. Mike continued to support L-108 operations for the remainder of the day.

During Operation's quest to equalize flight times, a process of musical pilots usually occurred toward the end of the month, particularly since two RONs during the period were the norm. This entailed a large amount of pilot deadheading and aircraft swapping that taxed accommodations at both upcountry sites. Because Jack Connor, Don Buxton, Bill Zeitler, and Lou McCasland RON at Long Tieng, Mike was obliged to stay overnight at Sam Tong the entire RON period. The uncustomary high time also required frequent ferry trips to Udorn for inspections and maintenance repair.

On the sixth day of Triangle's opening movements, Marshall worked two fuel loads from Sam Tong in support of the operation.

After completing work at Moung Soui, Marshall was dispatched north to support Houa Moung and serve as the primary H-34 SAR coverage north. Since weather cooperated, Mike had no problem arriving at Site-58, but one can only imagine what coursed through his mind as he traversed close to the area where he had almost resided permanently. The mission became what we later called "a working standby," and he did not forfeit any flight time to the Department of Defense's Yankee Team commitment. It is also possible that Mike never knew he was assigned to the area to cover reconnaissance missions photographing the upper reaches of Route-7 and the Plain of Jars.

For the next three days, Mike shuttled troops and supplies to forward areas outside Long Tieng. This entailed landing at rarely visited Meo sites to brief leaders of the RLA operation and to coordinate troop movements. One site was located at Phou So (LS-57), a high Meo village cum strip on the north side of a



A mix of aircraft supporting Mung Soui. Left to right: Dornier, small reconnaissance plane, and UH-34Ds.
Marshall Collection.

mountain of the same name. To avoid overflying the dangerous western reaches of the Plain of Jars, we normally passed slightly north of this site at altitude on the way to service sites north of the Plain. Another location was at Ban Long Pot (LS-132), a somewhat reluctant recruiting area recently pressed into Vang Pao's camp.

RLA troops continued to move slowly toward their objectives. Following friendly air strikes, elements of GM-16 were in position to attack Phou Soung by the 25th, but General Kouprasith was persuaded to wait a day or so for possible Pathet Lao evacuation, and until Meo forces had reached flanking positions.

Supported by air, and encountering some success, the Vang Vieng column began attacking Ban Phanom on Route-13 below Moung Kassy. Initial reports indicated the GM had seized the site, but this was still a considerable distance from Ban Cheng and the final objective.⁹

On Tuesday the 27th, "C" and I deadheaded to Sam Tong on Bird and Son Dornier, N11. The previous day, I had encountered Tony at the Air America complex waiting for transportation to Long Tieng. While briefing him on the positive acceptance and progress of the food fund, he appeared pleased at its general acceptance and slipped me twenty dollars as his four-month participation. In turn, I presented him one hundred baht for the faithful houseboy's monthly wages. It was not very much to pay the boy, but his tasks were not arduous. They only included keeping the teapot full and boiling and washing the dishes. Out of compassion for the crippled orphan, Tony provided him food and lodging.

⁹ Vientiane Situation Reports, 07/25-26/64.
Ken Conboy, 112.

When we arrived, Marshall was still completing his first fuel leg, so I waited to assume command of Hotel-20. Following a face-to-face briefing and transfer Mike and Mondello departed for Udorn on a Caribou.

Surprisingly, the monsoon weather patterns abated, which permitted maximum flying for several days. After I shuttled personnel and supplies to forward sites around Phou Da Pho, Vint Lawrence, recently back from sick leave in the States, directed me to Mounng Soui late in the day. Sam Jordon was already there. He informed me that Thai and Requirements Office personnel wanted us to sling two 105mm howitzers and bullets to western hilltop positions. The guns would provide supporting tactical artillery support for Neutralist troops slowly advancing toward the road junction should they need to withdraw. This was a reasonable request, one with which we could easily comply. However, because cargo lift training proficiency was not conducted at Udorn, we were still constrained by Company Operations Manual regulations, which required management authorization before conducting external load operations. It was a strange policy for us Marine pilots who had conducted numerous lift operations in the field and aboard carriers. Right from the beginning of my Air America tour, I was told to never perform sling loads without prior approval. If I did, and crashed or dinged the machine in the process, I would be held accountable and probably terminated. This was actually a CYA drill that Rousselot originally inserted in the manual. It intended to restrict such operations to only qualified personnel, i.e. Marines authorizing Marines to perform a task. ¹⁰

¹⁰ In later years, utilizing a 1000-pound barrel filled with hardened cement, sling load training became an integral part of our six-month proficiency check rides.

Wayne was upcountry flying Hotel-22 with Art White. They were accomplishing a dual purpose: to complete Art's Captain checkout procedure, and to shake down the newly arrived H-34. Although he worked throughout the area, we were not able to raise Wayne on the radio. After attempting several calls to Udorn over the high frequency set, Abadie gave us the required approval for the sling operations.

Our ships were low on fuel, but the howitzer's weight and the 3,600-foot elevation of L-108 proved too much for the H-34 engines. Therefore, using the same method as employed at Phou Khe, I asked the technicians to separate the barrels from the carriages. That entailed a lot of work, which produced its share of grumbling, but in the end we prevailed. The resulting lift was flawless, for my machine was a 145 series with a strong engine and lots of power. Marking an additional difference, this time I was able to lift the carriage without removing the heavy tires.

The lift was timely, for during the day RLA troops actually moved from both the north and east without opposition. The Vang Vieng column had met the test thus far by clearing two Pathet Lao villages on the way to Moung Kassy.

Government movements since the 20th must have seriously impacted enemy forces, for the Red Prince, Souphanouvong, bitterly complained about the offensive to the Geneva Accords Co-chairmen. Pathet Lao radio at Khang Khay broadcast details of the operation indicating that Lao right wing and Kong Le sent six mobile groups to Vang Vieng, Kiou Kacham, Moung Soui, and environs to attack important NHLX Pathet Lao positions at Sala Phou Khoun and Moung Kassy. The announcer went on to say that rightist troops, supported by air, inflicted numerous atrocities on people in liberated areas. In justifying the offensive, RLA spokespersons falsely charged that the NHLX forces had attacked

Kong Le's troops at Moung Soui. Then the broadcaster reiterated a long voiced enemy stance; since the May 1961 ceasefire, territory northward from Ban Hin Heup to Van Vieng, Moung Kassy, and the entire Plain of Jars belonged to liberated Laos and the true Neutralist movement.

Complaints continued against the RLG, when the Polish commissioner Dzinsky and other ICC representatives visited Khang Khay on the 28th to talk with the NLHX leader regarding security of the Pathet Lao representatives still in Vientiane. While there, Dzinsky observed a flight of three American jets overhead, which were fired on by AAA batteries. ¹¹

Because they were not always present in Udorn, I had to deal with some crewmembers regarding contributions to the Long Tieng food fund while upcountry. Most offered a hundred baht with little comment. However, Sam Jordan, claiming that he rarely worked at Site-20A, initially chose not to participate. Because of others, like Wayne, who seldom journeyed to Long Tieng, but still contributed to the fund, I considered Sam's attitude unusual and miserly, but consistent with his "Cheap Charlie" reputation. Besides, as work requirements were rapidly expanding in Military Region Two, sure to include the entire pilot complement, I was reasonably certain that Sam's parsimonious attitude would eventually change. ¹²

The Company Personnel Manual stipulated a minimum of eight hours abstinence between "bottle to throttle for pilots scheduled to fly the following day." As I had long deduced from

¹¹ Memorandum from the Secretary of State Rusk to Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs William H. Sullivan, 07/27/64. Lao Country File, LBJ Library, 07/25,27/64.

¹² Attempting to accumulate wealth, I was frugal with my money, but Sam was renown in our group as one who really squeezed his nickels. By September, his work area and initial reluctance to participate in the fund changed.

a gin and tonic incident in the Corps on Mindoro Island, Philippine Islands, it was an excellent rule and most of us adhered to the wise policy. Even during special events, like Meo New Year or Pop's bacis, there was no drinking allowed during the day for personnel scheduled for continuing flights. Fortunately, this item had been settled in the past between Pop and VP at our request. Despite the two beers we had at Long Tieng before dinner, we were normally in bed by seven or eight o'clock and did not violate any regulations.

With the CPH RONing at Long Tieng, one might think we would attempt to conceal or temper our afterhours beer imbibing. However, Wayne was a realistic person who also enjoyed a beer. This was especially so after flying eleven hours and twenty-five minutes. Vint, still appearing a bit wan from his bout of hepatitis, was prohibited from drinking because of the disease's effect on his liver. Even before the illness, not enamored with small talk engendered by alcohol, he characteristically slipped out of the hut directly after dinner. Tony remained chatting, then after chugging his pint of Mekong whiskey, left "to make a baby." He looked tipsy, but we all knew, like well-oiled clockwork, he would appear at air ops before us in the morning.

Wayne and I teamed up to work the Long Pot area and Mounng Soui the next day. I did not mind working for the trusty Meo during the operation, but I was concerned about the forever-wavering Neutralists, whose loyalty to government, or anyone but themselves, was suspect at any given time. In addition, while currying FAN favor tailored to keep them in the government fold, USG provided every snippet they demanded. In doing so, they horribly spoiled the faction. The policy inevitably led to potentially acrimonious confrontations between our pilots and the ground pounders.

Specifically, if a pilot refused to perform a mission because of various factors like weather, load, enemy situation, non-availability of fuel, or lack of information, because of the misunderstanding and language barrier, he was sometimes challenged to perform at gunpoint. Such disagreement never occurred while working for Meo troops, mainly because a more realistic Vang Pao would never tolerate such an infraction. An offender would be terminated with "extreme prejudice."

Billy Zeitler was one of the first helicopter pilots to experience Neutralist pressure tactics. Toward the end of Triangle, he was assigned to support an offensive in the hills near Phou Khout. During the day, a FAN officer scaled the side of the H-34 demanding that Bill proceed farther east. Believing he was already too close to the front lines, Billy vigorously refused. Hanging by one hand, the incensed man produced and waved a pistol at the cockpit. Zeitler then lifted to a high hover and informed Flight Mechanic Pascual to cover him when they landed. Terrified, the Neut threw the gun to the ground. As "Z" touched down, "Pappy," a former jungle guerrilla fighter against the Japanese during World War Two, leaped from the cabin door grasping grenades in both hands. That ended the incident, but the damage had been done. Word of the event spread rapidly through our ranks and added to our mistrust of the Neutralist element. ¹³

I personally never experienced a similar problem while working Requirements Office Mounng Soui. However, with only one attaché officer present at the site, and unable or unwilling to adequately control the FAN, to discourage any incidents, I openly carried my Ruger either in my shoulder holster, or in plain view on the left seat.

¹³ Bill Zeitler Interview, 09/01/01.

After landing on a saddleback ridge, I dropped off several troops, who conducted a hasty pow-wow with villagers, and then began to slash heavy bamboo foliage to expand a helipad. I returned later and was not impressed with their attempts to clear the landing zone. Therefore, although not part of my job description, I shut down. Using my best sign language I supervised enlargement of the confined area.

With the development of new landing pads, some of us encouraged locals or troops involved to continue improving landing sites. This not only improved safety, but in many cases, allowed us to carry heavier loads during variable and adverse wind conditions. Since the natives and even Customers possessed little idea of an H-34's dimensions, it was necessary for us to ensure at least minimum blade clearance. I always took the attitude that a larger pad afforded better maneuvering potential for all contingencies.

It was not the first time I had done this. One day I was barely able to squeeze onto a narrow ridge between Sam Tong and Ban Na, for a tall tree blocked good access into and out of the new pad. For some unknown reason (perhaps mountain spirits or laziness), the folks at the location appeared reluctant to fell the tree. Therefore, without an "English speaker" onboard to help, I shut down and liberally employing Vang Pao's name, harangued them until the tree no longer caused a problem.

I was not always certain how a new pad would be utilized. As we were not privy to Vang Pao's reasoning and motives, it could have included any number of individual reasons, or a combination. We had to draw our own conclusions. In this case, it certainly must have involved Triangle. The area was fairly close to Route-13, which afforded easy access by guerrilla units. It also protected Long Tieng's western flank, presented



Meo women harvesting the milky white sap from the opium poppy to process and barter for silver bars or cash to purchase consumables.

Author Collection.

recruitment possibilities, refugee relocation, and was reputed to be a good citrus and opium growing area.

Toward afternoon, I relinquished the nearly timed out Hotel Two-Zero for Hotel-15, with Johnny Sibal as my Flight Mechanic. One of the stops involved a trip to Moung Soui.

The Luang Prabang regiment, after moving down from Phou Chia on the 22nd, marched back toward the road, and paused to coordinate the final assault on Sala Phou Khoun. At the same time, GM-16 closed on Phou Soung, a high point just east of the road junction. ¹⁴

Both the loss of the Plain of Jars and the Triangle operation afforded a rare and unusual period when Vang Pao and Kong Le were in general accord. Normally, even though they represented elements of the Royal Lao military, the two men were at each other's throats. The FAN had conveniently neglected to support Vang Pao's flank during an operation, or had suddenly withdrawn from the field too many times in the past, especially during the costly Phou Khe operation. Kong Le's past turncoat image also did nothing to instill a special trust and confidence needed between comrades in arms. Despite all the bitterness and recriminations of past operations, Vang Pao agreed to participate in Triangle, but only in a floating autonomous guerrilla role. However, this still required some coordination with FAN leaders.

Thai PARU Rashan, Vang Pao's trusted advisor, was tapped for the interface duty with the Neutralist faction, as well as the Thai artillery unit and RO representative. Over time, I delivered him several times to Moung Soui to perform this duty.

Everyone liked Rashan. He was thoughtful, friendly, and spoke excellent English among a forest of non-speakers. However,

¹⁴ Ken Conboy, 112.

he did possess a Thai trait anathema to a Westerner. It was common to see young male friends holding hands on the Thai streets (females also). We originally thought the distasteful custom displayed a sexual preference until apprised by Thai people that it was merely part of the culture and not at all unusual among friends. Still, it bordered on a subject we did not discuss or want to be associated with.

Virtually the only PARU among the few assigned to Long Tieng, Rashan was a hand holder. The first time he grabbed and massaged my hand, we were walking up the Long Tieng strip. I was shocked and at a loss as to how to react. Cushioned by the knowledge that it was an accepted Thai practice, I still considered it repugnant, but could not risk withdrawing my hand and insulting a fellow worker. Therefore, aware that he was acting merely out of friendship, I endured the handholding, but was relieved when it was over. When talking to other pilots later, I discovered that I was not unique in experiencing this embarrassment, and felt somewhat comforted when Mike Marshall and Marius Burke admitted that Rashan did the same with them. ¹⁵

Marius Burke developed a good relationship with Rashan and they were comfortable with each other. One day, Burke landed and, after securing his aircraft, began walking toward the hooch. Rashan met him saying, "*Let's go and get something to eat.*" Then, while they walked, the PARU reached over and grabbed Marius's hand. This was obviously a sign of friendship, but marked the first time anything like that had happened to the pilot. Since Rashan was such a tough person, Marius was disinclined to remove his hand. He, like the rest of us, became acclimated to the display of friendship. ¹⁶

¹⁵ Mike Marshall Email, 03/02/04.

¹⁶ Marius Burke Interview at the Author's house, 05/30/98.

Wednesday morning dawned as "D-Day" for the move on Phou Khoun. Steve Stevens flew with me in a First Officer capacity, and he probably received his fill of combat flying and a sore fanny from the eleven hour maximum effort. I was glad he was along, for he had a first-class attitude and kept me in stitches with his jokes. He was a good stick man and a person I surmised would not remain a First Officer long.

While FAR units surrounded and closed on the road junction, several of us moved Meo troops from Long Tieng and sites around the Long Pot area to northern high ground overlooking the objective. A disused and largely unimproved area, we had to carefully select acceptable landing spots. Fortunately, there was no opposition in the sheltered mountains. Therefore, following initial anxiety over the unknown situation, and after initial landings, the job became routine.

With the operation's northern flank secured, and after sketchy intelligence indicating that the road junction was defended by minimal forces, two companies from Youa Vang Ly's Special Guerrilla Unit (SGU) were lifted onto Route-13 south of the junction. ¹⁷ While we slept, Meo units attacked and then moved toward the deserted intersection. ¹⁸

Wayne, assigned to work Paksane and the Borikhane areas during the push to regain control of the Tha Thom valley, missed the fun at Sala Phou Khoun. However, he enjoyed his own form of excitement, incurring battle damage at Moung Nham (LS-63) a few miles north of the Tha Thom Valley. ¹⁹

¹⁷ This officer was referred to as "The Indian" because of his chiseled dark features and flushed face.

¹⁸ State, 07/29/64.
Ken Conboy, 112.

¹⁹ EW Knight Email.

Moving behind Kong Le's rapidly advancing column, GM-17 captured Ban Thieng, a small village located at a bend in the road five miles south of Moung Kassy, and prepared to link up with the FAN and move on Moung Kassy. However, before further movement could commence, the enemy launched a battalion size counterattack southwest of Ban Cheng. Repulsing the attack, FAR and FAN units entered an abandoned Kassy town on the 30th. ²⁰

Intelligence projections before the start of Triangle had been accurate as to possible enemy reaction and disposition to overwhelming odds. Without undue resistance to the government offensive, largely intact, an estimated 500 enemy abandoned the Sala Phou Khoun road junction and faded into the jungle to assume a secondary role of aggressor guerrilla bands. Seeking to minimize RLA losses, the Lao General Staff must have certainly considered this development a distinct possibility in their delaying tactics. It also dovetailed nicely into the Lao Buddhist philosophy of not taking lives.

However, the delay in taking the final objective was not in aggressive Vang Pao's rulebook. Taking advantage of an opportunity to upstage the foot-dragging RLA, goaded by Tony Poe, whose Marine philosophy was to advance at all costs, the general instructed his irregulars to seize the day and take the junction. When government regiments finally dribbled into the formerly embattled area on the morning and afternoon of the 30th, they discovered Meo troops already in firm control.

Despite the Meo coup, acknowledgement of which was suppressed in official USG communications and press releases, FAR generals in Vientiane touted their victory and stressed the outstanding use of combined forces. During the day, Generals

²⁰ State, 07/29-30/64.

Kouprasith, Vang Pao, and Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma visited the liberated junction.

Military experts measured the operation's success in captured military booty. The impressive haul included six armored cars, twelve trucks, four "Long Tom" 85mm field guns, four 105mm howitzers, and tons of ammunition. The formerly one-sided war had taken a turn favoring the Royal Lao Government. In a constant "what goes around comes around" cycle, much captured western equipment likely originally belonged to FAN and FAR forces when they were expelled from the road and Plain of Jars.

Although not yet totally collated, enemy casualties were deemed heavy, mostly derived from constant air strikes. Pathet Lao prisoners did not include Vietnamese. General Kouprasith indicated nationalist armed forces casualties were light at ten killed in action (KIA) and twenty wounded in action (WIA).

Triangle had been a success. Government territory reclaimed during the operation included Phou Soung, Phou Kheung, Ban Tchieng, Pha Ang, Pha Tang, Pha Home, Moung Kassy, Route 13, and all areas initially captured by Neutralist and Pathet Lao forces in 1961, and lost by default to the Pathet Lao after the FAN ejection from the western Plain of Jars in May 1963.

Statements from the U.S. Embassy staff attributed Triangle's victory to cooperation between all the RLG forces. Good weather allowing coordinated air and ground operations also contributed to the overall success. Some bridges or sections were out along Route-13, but after repair would enable the country's monarch to transit the road from Luang Prabang to Vientiane for the first time in years. However, there was concern over potential attacks along the road from wandering enemy guerrilla bands.

To the State Department, it appeared that there was now a more complete balance of power in north-central Laos.

Recognizing this new parity, the Pathet Lao's political arm might be more amenable to negotiate with Souvanna Phouma in a formal Geneva Accords setting.

Despite exultation over Triangle's successful mission opening the road from Luang Prabang to Vientiane, and relieving pressure on Moung Soui's defenses, Phou Khout still constituted a problem for the three FAN battalions tasked to retake the position. This would remain a challenge for weeks.

Triangle's relatively easy success inspired overconfidence and optimism among Lao generals about immediate capture of the PDJ, securing territory in the northwest, and moving on the Tchepone region. Unger and his country team did not support the unsettling talk of recapturing all of Laos and ejecting the North Vietnamese by combat. Instead, the embassy goal remained to strengthen and secure current RLG positions through political, social, economic, and military programs.

A long-range plan to thoroughly improve RLA's capability might involve up to a year's effort. Following satisfactory progress, a gradual establishment of countrywide RLG authority might then be considered. This might include taking Tha Thom in Military Region Two; Nhomarath and Mahaxay (L-57) in Military Region Three; securing the Pakse, Attapeu, Saravane salients in Military Region Four; and Mekong River traffic from Ban Houei Sai to Luang Prabang to Vientiane. Finally, the plan envisioned Meo efforts to reestablish positions in areas east of Xieng Khouang Ville.

There were few illusions in Washington over the success of Triangle, and CIA analysis of Laos' near term future was not particularly encouraging. A sharp deterioration in the military situation seemed likely with a strong Pathet Lao counteroffensive expected. If an offensive occurred around Moung Soui, USG would face greater involvement. Such a situation might

result in a rightist coup that would set policy back to pre-1961. Any communist thrust was not expected to extend to the Mekong.

By early fall, except for USAF personnel continuing to support T-28 activities, a majority of temporary ARMA people had been withdrawn from the country. However, there was some concern at State that diplomats and foreign press in Vientiane, although not certain of the number, were aware that the elevated level of U.S. military attaches was higher than before May. There was also worry that an ICC investigation might reveal the participation of U.S. personnel in military operations, particularly around Moung Soui. ²¹

With main offensives concluded and objectives attained, the mopping up and consolidation phase began. Therefore, once again flying solo, compared to the previous day, I only flew a couple of fuel loads supporting and repositioning troops in the hills. Along with FAR troops on the road, their mission included the difficult task of seeking out and keeping the dispersed enemy on the run and off Route-13.

Wayne accompanied Billy Z while conducting his semi-annual route check and participating in the ongoing operation. They took a very jubilant Tony Poe to the road junction and shut down. While there, he noted rough wooden ersatz 3.5 rocket launchers erected on the perimeter to dissuade the Pathet Lao and their Vietnamese friends from entering the liberated zone. ²²

²¹ Segment Sources:
State, 07/30/64.
Ken Conboy, 112.
Leonard Unger to State, 07/31/64.
Telegram Unger to State, 08/03/64.
CIA, Coper to Bundy, 08/10/64.
Green to Rusk, 10/01/64.

²² EW Knight Email, 03/26/01, 03/27/01.

That night, Vang Pao invited us all to a victory dinner in the thatched long house to celebrate with his officers and political cadre. As usual, the laudatory speeches were extensive and boring. Obligatory toasts invariably followed the accolades. Naturally, the longer the evening wore on, the more inebriated and long-winded our hosts became. During the "*Chaiyo-Chiayo-Chiayo*," I stuck to a sip of beer and later claiming early work the next day, ducked out with Vint.

All good things end. On the 31st, I worked locally for less than two hours before relinquishing Hotel-15 to the incoming Captain. Agreeing with Tony that Triangle represented an excellent operation and morale booster for our side, we took inventory of necessary items required to keep the operations hut pantry stocked. Depending on items available at our inadequately supplied supermarket, I planned to send a case of milk, boxes of salt, Ajax scouring cleanser, bottles of Tabasco hot sauce, paper napkins and towels on the first available aircraft.

Toward afternoon, N1153Q, a Bird Dornier arrived from Udorn, which became my ticket home.

Because of the tight pilot situation, I was afforded little time to rest, and was scheduled to fly the next day. Along with lead ground mechanic Louie Moser, I tested Hotel-17, recently retrofitted from the original Coast Guard boosted throttles, to a conventional synchronized system. Everyone was happy with the conversion, for it substantially reduced workloads and greatly enhanced safety by allowing a reduced division of attention between the cockpit and landing zone during critical approach modes.

Between shutdowns for minor adjustments, I learned the sad news concerning the demise of little Annie Moher. Childless throughout their earlier married life, Tom and Kathy had adopted the toddler from Saint Mary's orphanage. Her death remained a mystery until scuttlebutt from an Army doctor indicated that she might have ingested rat poison someone had scattered outside the house.

Since I would soon depart on leave, Operations scheduled me upcountry. On Sunday, I accompanied our latest Captain, Art White, from T-08 to Wattay Airport and Long Tieng in Hotel-20, the same aircraft I had flown on a training flight with Bob Nunez on the previous day.

At the beginning of August, all former Thai Sierra sites were renamed Tango, and the Udorn call sign became Tango Zero Eight. "Ule" was the first to be elevated to the exalted rank of Captain since Marius, and he helped cushion my second to last position on the seniority totem pole status.

After arrival, I assumed command of Hotel-21 with "C" and flew a couple of local missions. Toward noon, after refueling, Vint, forever attempting to save phantom Agency money, loaded the ship with several people, and a recently deceased individual

securely wrapped in layers of parachute cloth, for delivery to multiple sites in the Long Pot area. To ameliorate the deceased family's grief, feel-good consumables like crocks of fish sauce, tins of cooking oil, bags of salt, rice, and other items were stacked in the cabin. When I attempted to obtain additional information concerning exact locations and site elevations, he indicated that one of the honchos on board would direct me. As usual, Vint was vague about supplying mission information, and since his return he seemed more thin-skinned than usual. He still looked unwell, so I discounted his indifference, but it was damned annoying from a pilot perspective.

The mission area covered substantial mountain ranges stretching northwest-southeast for miles along the Nam Ngum's west bank. During Triangle's final phase, I had worked Sites-101 and 103 along the lower east side. However, I had never landed on, or was familiar with, any site on the west side.

When we arrived in the locale, the "guide" grunted and pointed to where he wanted me to land. I was not happy. The pad, if you could call it that, was located by a small village adjacent to a small bowl-like enclosure, and within a few hundred feet from the top of a 6,600-foot mountain. Massive, sheer-sided cliffs on two exposed sides dropped into the Nam Ting valley floor. It was obvious that this landing was not going to be a cakewalk, for, pre-assuming a much lower elevation, I had let Vint talk me into carrying excess weight that might now present a problem. Because of the pad's difficult location and poor wave off potential, a low recon was ill-advised, and with variable wind currents swirling over and around the mountain, it was impossible to determine a prominent wind direction or velocity. Overall, the situation smacked of disaster.

By rights, I should have returned to Long Tieng to burn off excess fuel, reduce payload, or aborted the mission. However, returning the load would have proved highly embarrassing, and inconsistent with my pride and work ethic. Aware that it would be disrespectful in any culture, I asked "C" to inquire if we could air drop the body. Negative. Further conversation revolved around first alternating landing zones, but the language barrier in the cabin section prevented resolution of that idea.

I circled several times at high altitude, while attempting to better gauge winds and condition of the landing site. It was fruitless, but I was also gathering courage to commence an approach. I finally began a steep approach thinking I would go around the instant the situation warranted. While closing on the clearing, I did not have a comfortable feeling. Then, observing numerous high stumps scattered around the pad on short final, I realized there was probably no viable landing zone available. Already carrying high RPM, I began to increase power and deviate to the right to abort the landing. By this time, my apparent groundspeed was low, so I lowered the aircraft nose slightly hoping to increase speed and clear the mountain. However, I did not have sufficient power available, and dropped into the saucer shaped area below the ville's perimeter.

The bowl was just large enough to maneuver, but too sloped to land, so with the engine screaming at maximum power, I began slow right hand 360-degree circles trying to climb upward the few feet necessary to pop over the rim and dive down the southwest side of the mountain. Unfortunately, I was too heavy and never attained necessary power, ground speed, and altitude to escape my predicament. While dividing my attention between the triple tachometer, manifold pressure instruments, and the ground, I continued losing precious speed and altitude. This ultimately resulted in a power-on controlled crash. Recognizing

my fate, I told "C" to hang on, and landed near the rim on the inside of the bowl. The aircraft slid a few feet down slope through a tangled mass of brush and other foliage and came to rest, with the left clamshell door and exhaust stacks next to a large stump.

Fortunately, the impact had not been particularly hard; more like a brush with the ground with an uncontrolled gentle slide. After the ship stopped moving, I sat motionless for a few seconds in shock and disbelief. Had I managed to damage a new H-34? I had heard other pilots joke about running out of airspeed, altitude, power, and options all at the same time; now I had experienced it.

Miraculously, there did not appear to be serious damage to Hotel-21. However, the jungle obstacles did exact a toll. All the fiberglass pylons supporting the ADF sense antenna wires under the belly were shredded or broken. Tail rotor tips were damaged, but appeared equally and cleanly clipped. Luckily, the aircraft had stopped just short of the large stump that would have surely crumpled the clamshell door and perhaps damaged exhaust stacks, engine cylinder head fins, or accessories.

I had damaged tail rotor blades twice before and managed to fly without a problem. Once, in the Corps, while making a hasty sidewise approach out of division formation to the carrier deck, the FM whip antenna apparently flexed laterally and contacted a blade. Another incident occurred earlier in the year, while extracting Thai PARU from peril in the Xieng Dat area. On that particular occasion, the damage was greater, but not felt in a hover, while flying to Long Tieng, or even discovered until after shut down. Since neither case resulted in any noticeable vibrations, or control problems, I decided that after a run-up, if no vibration was felt and everything else was deemed acceptable, I would return the ship to Site-20A. The alternative

was not particularly appealing. Even in the unlikely event that I could contact another aircraft from the remote area, delays would probably commit us to the weeds for hours. In addition, I was not sure another helicopter would even be able to land at the site. My choice was easy. I was leaving.

Except for my self-esteem, no one was hurt. However, rationalizing my boo-boo, I became extremely upset about risking our hides over a corpse. I insisted that the villagers streaming downhill from the pad remove the object from my ship. Amid the characteristic wailing common to the Meo culture, black clad men carried the body up the trail where villagers gathered to view the remains. Happy to receive the goodies, others smiled while they followed with the rest of the load.

After ascertaining that I had adequate tail rotor clearance, I cranked the engine and engaged the rotors. No abnormal vibrations were felt at different RPM settings, so I cautiously attempted to lift from the slope. Even after removing the body, all goods, and passengers, the aircraft would still not budge sufficiently to take off. The ship needed more weight reduced. Therefore, I shut down and had "C" drain a large amount of fuel from the sumps. This method of defueling was not normal and could be dangerous, but I had little alternative. All we could do was keep smokers well away from the ship and hope that no stray sparks from nails in our boots striking a stone or static electricity ignited the fuel.

As to the volatility of the purple colored aviation gasoline, I was reminded of Herb Baker's incident at Pakse. The mechanic was fueling the H-34 while Baker conversed with a Customer. Herb, a knowledgeable person, who was not ashamed to let you know exactly that, claimed that gasoline in a liquid state was not explosive. To illustrate his point, believing it would be immediately snuffed out, the Captain threw a lighted

cigarette into a spilled pool of gas next to the helicopter. Herb was half right. Gas in a liquid form cannot be ignited. However, he forgot that when a container of gas is opened and exposed to air, surface molecules readily convert from a liquid into a gas which, when mixed with oxygen, is extremely combustible. The result of Herb's miscalculation resulted in a dandy fire. Embarrassed, risking his life, Herb partially redeemed himself by darting into the cockpit, starting the ship, and moving to a safe area. Except for some scorched marks, no major damage occurred to the helicopter, but another Air America anecdote was born.

Choosing to launch ASAP, I did not wait until the gasoline was fully absorbed into surface debris and soil. This time, the ship responded to the lightened load. I was able to hover with power left to spare, and there was still no discernible vibration through the pedals. Therefore, electing to attempt a takeoff, I eased forward through translational lift, and attained sufficient speed to climb and just clear the lip of our captivity. The egress was close, but with a strong engine and a little pilot technique, the outcome was never in doubt

On return to Long Tieng, without presenting details, I radioed Udorn requesting a tail rotor, and a replacement ship. Surprisingly, I was advised to take over Hotel-19 already parked at the base.

I was not happy with Vint for overloading the ship and failing to brief me on particulars of the mission. He countered that he was filling in for Terry Burke and Tony Poe. He rightly insisted that during his extended absence he had not kept up on much of what was occurring in Military Region Two. What could I say? I was the PIC and ultimately responsible for all facets of my machine, crew, and mission. The blame was entirely mine for not obtaining more information, carrying too much weight, and

electing to land at an untenable site. Did I learn a valuable lesson, an error I would not repeat? Of course. Would this incident constitute my final moment of truth? Probably not...

After taking possession of Hotel-19, "C" and I continued to work thirty minutes into twilight. Despite the earlier incident, we finished the day with a decent hourly total. Naturally, knowing that I was wasting my breath, I recommended to "C" that he not talk about our incident in the hills.

We worked the next two days shuttling troops and supplies to forward positions in support of post Triangle consolidation, with major emphasis on movement in the barren mountains along the east side of Sala Phou Khoun. All the activity was calculated to continue clearing operations, and deny PL access to prime real estate sorely needed for refugee relocation.

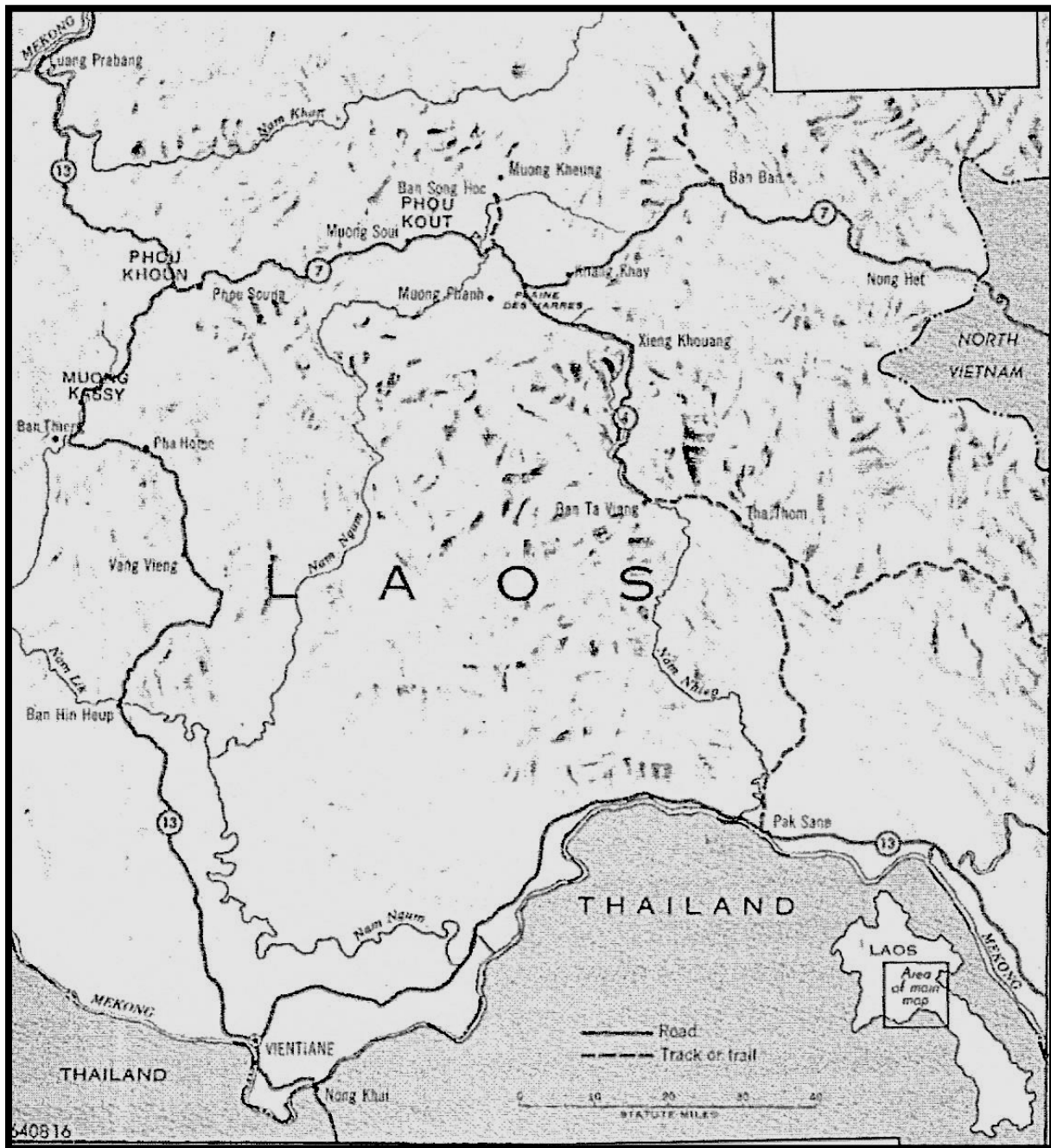
Since the earlier loss of the corridor along Route-7 and the Plain of Jars, thousands of hill and lowlanders were displaced. Following medical assistance and processing, they required sustenance and places to live. Acceding to the mountain refugees' requirements, new living areas were carefully selected, to include secure high ground, access to a good water source, and adequate growing areas. Many walked south from Moung Cha to settle. We shuttled others into hills south of Sam Tong, and lately reclaimed areas around Long Pot. Lowlanders were treated somewhat differently. Many were flown to Vientiane to settle on flat lands near the capital or to similar areas along the Nam Ngum. Others stopped to camp in the Moung Soui area. The refugee problem was nothing new, and tended to tax USAID, other voluntary organizations, and the air support system to the maximum.

TRIANGLE'S AFTERMATH

Despite reports of complete success in clearing Route-13, on the first, the FAR GM-16 regiment at Phou Khoun moved north along Route-13, past Kiou Kacham (Site-04) toward Liang Prabang to clear a suspected Pathet Lao battalion scattered in the hills east of the road. The mop-up continued by all units with no major action reported along Route-13.

Moung Soui proper remained quiet. To the east, the fourth three-battalion ground attack on tenacious Pathet Lao units holding the Phou Khout summit was scheduled for the second, then slipped to the fifth. Success of the projected offensive then depended largely on good weather to allow preliminary air attacks.

The advance on Phou Khout began as planned, although early morning foul weather prevented T-28 pilots from locating their targets, and the pilots returned to Wattay Airport without expending munitions. After the weather cooperated somewhat to allow several sorties, government troops surged up the hillsides, but were prevented from reaching the top by extensive mine fields. Responding to the projected government ground attack, the following day, enemy radio intercepts revealed orders for the few troops left alive to abandon Phou Khout, and assemble near Phou Keng to await reinforcements. Then orders were issued to concentrate artillery weapon fire in the same area. Friendly bombing and photo reconnaissance resumed, while government troops moved cautiously forward on the mountain behind mobile artillery pieces. Finally, the hill was surrounded and the troops moved upward toward the final pockets of resistance, estimated at one enemy platoon. By 1700 hours on the ninth, the Neutralists optimistically reported seizing most of Phou Khout, with only mopping up operations remaining to be accomplished.



Graphic displaying the contested hills of Phou Kout's strategic location, and proximity to the Neutralist base at Mung Soui. Joint government clearing operations continued southwest of Mung Kassy and Route-13.

Central Intelligence Agency map, 08/17/64.

The Pathet Lao maintained AAA fire against T-28 strikes on their positions. *"On 13 August a T-28 aircraft, flown by a Thai pilot, was shot down over Phou Kout hill. An air search has located the plane, which was completely demolished..."*¹

Despite glowing FAN reports claiming the capture of Phou Khout, the campaign to retake the site persisted for some time, and by the 18th, friendly troops withdrew from the hard won positions because of reported dreaded Vietnamese reinforcements approaching the mountain.

To the south, in the Vang Vieng area, enemy artillery from ten kilometers southwest challenged FAR defenses at Ban Thieng. Over a two-day period, T-28 pilots and friendly artillery struck back at the Ban Namone Pathet Lao positions in the Nam Lik valley, where the 1961 bilateral peace talks occurred. This was followed by an offensive farther south on Ban Moung Kheung. Enemy casualties were estimated at thirty, with seven prisoners taken. More importantly, FAR soldiers captured four 37mm, two 85MM, and two 105mm artillery pieces, along with six armored vehicles, four trucks, and forty small arms weapons. Twenty miles west of Vang Vieng, ten miles from the Mekong River, FAR troops conducted clearing operations around Moung Met, an area that had not been entered by government representatives for many years. Losses were light, Soviet ammunition was destroyed, and enemy forces faded into the jungle terrain.

T-28 bombing continued throughout Military Region Two and Military Region One, with air strikes hitting seventeen targets at Ban Nam Bac fifty miles north of the royal capital. On the northern Plain of Jars, photo reconnaissance revealed AAA and six 85mm guns at Khang Khay. This potential threat dissuaded the

¹ CIA Daily Brief, 08/17/64

Vientiane air operations center (AOC) from scheduling T-28 operations in the area.

General Thao Ma informed AIRA's Colonel Tyrrell that he was considering employing his Savannakhet-based T-28s to fly reconnaissance and strike bridges, supply depots, and other targets in the eastern portion of Military Region Three.

Within the Johnson administration, advisors stated that consolidation of retaken territory should continue, as should FAN attempts to secure Phou Khout. In addition, they acknowledged that T-28 participation represented a major factor contributing to Triangle's success, and seriously impinged on PL morale. These valuable assets would be continued to be used while consolidating gains. No expanded military action was envisioned at Phu Keng or other areas, but could change should a communist move ensue to counter RLG offenses. To keep abreast of enemy moves, despite increased risk, it was believed that road watch teams and other forms of intelligence gathering should be intensified.

Within the Royal Lao Government, the resounding victory enhanced Souvanna Phouma's reputation and political standing, which it was believed would quiet restive right-wing generals. With his hand greatly strengthened, a fourteen-nation conference and negotiations could begin soon. Indeed, the Prime Minister had already agreed to a Paris tripartite meeting, which he suggested commence on 24 August. Operating from a position of strength, he probably would not insist on total communist withdrawal from the Plain of Jars prior to any meeting.

Summing up, advisors concluded that it satisfied the interest of USG to stabilize the Lao situation between government forces and the communists to reduce chances of enemy escalation. However, in seeking this goal, Souvanna Phouma should be careful not to squander his effective negotiating

points, especially T-28 operations, without receiving beneficial agreements in return. It was considered particularly necessary to reduce enemy action in the MR-3 Panhandle region. ²

THE TONKIN GULF INCIDENT AND AIR ESCALATION

During this period, developments off the North Vietnamese coast in the Gulf of Tonkin influenced USG to take advantage of pre-planned measures to substantially escalate the Second Indochina Air War. Purported enemy patrol boat (PT) attacks on the destroyers USS *Maddox* and USS *Turner Joy* on successive nights led to U.S. Navy Yankee Team retaliatory strikes on fuel depots and boats in and around Vinh. Diverted from Lao operations, carrier-based A1Es, F8Us, and A4D crews flew sixty four offensive sorties. Two planes were lost and Lieutenant Everett Alvarez became America's first pilot captured by the North Vietnamese regime. There were no follow up strikes, for some planners in the Johnson Administration hoped Hanoi leaders would negotiate for peace after the limited operation.

Following the incident, USG received Thai government approval to base jet aircraft throughout the country, theoretically for military SAR requirements. A system of U.S. control of air defense and employment of out-of-country operations also received approval from the South Vietnamese government. With the new developments in the Tonkin Gulf

² Segment sources:

Vientiane American Embassy to State, 08/01/64.

Situation Reports to State, 08/03-04/64.

Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction*.

Situation Report, 1700, 08/05/64.

ARMA Vientiane, 08/06/64.

ARMA Vientiane, Status Report Phou Khout, 08/07/64.

Situation Report, 1700, 08/07/64.

Ambassador Leonard Unger-Triangle, 06/17/64.

McGeorge Bundy Files, LBJ Library, Austin, Texas, 08/13/64.

Victor Anthony, 126-129.

justifying escalation measures, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara endorsed additional interceptor and fighter-bomber movement to South Vietnam and Thailand. Months in planning stages, as a portion of Operations Plan 37-64, a USAF F-105 squadron containing eighteen aircraft was alerted to redeploy from Yokota, Japan, to Korat, Thailand. Four F-100s and two KB-50 fuel tankers were directed to the Takhli base. As alert orders were issued to other CINCPAC battle units, additional planes were sent to South Vietnam airbases.

Emulating one of Newton's laws that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction, by early August, Chinese military and civilian leaders were aware that the U.S. was willing to employ air power against North Vietnamese targets. Therefore, to counter any balance of airpower, they moved a regiment of jet fighters to the North's Puc Yen airfield. Over a four month period, they doubled the number of fighters in the area. The buildup included delivery of some Soviet-manufactured MiG-19s (NATO designation Farmer) and MiG-21s (Fishbed). The aircraft build-up included adding new radar installations, incorporating the latest Chinese long-range early warning and ground control intercept equipment technology, into the Vietnamese air defense system. In addition, AAA capability was moved to the Chinese-DVR border near the planned construction of a military airfield.

While flying over Phuc Yen, a U-2 pilot photographed an interesting development regarding changes in the balances of the two air forces. Reacting to U.S escalation and a buildup of American air units in Southeast Asia, constituting a threat to the photo reconnaissance RF-101C Voodoos flying over the north, on 6 August, the North Vietnam People's Air Force received seventeen Soviet type MiG 15 and 17 jet planes to augment their

thirty trainers, fifty transports, and four helicopters. ³ Twenty early warning radars dotted the landscape. By the 10th, Washington announced this discovery to the U.S. public, and that several airfields in southern China had been improved or built to accommodate and offer sanctuary to North Vietnamese aircraft.

Although initially on a minor scale, there could have been a secondary reason for the build-up of communist fighter aircraft. Early in the month, Thai T-28 pilots were accused of bombing North Vietnamese villages on the northern border. Because borders were nebulous, with exact demarcation lines in dispute between both nations, Souvanna Phouma denied the communist allegation. When interrogated, the pilots claimed that their direction of flight, or bombing, did not violate the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's (DRV) airspace. RLAFF reconnaissance was scheduled to photograph the target area.

By September, it became increasingly clear that missions into northern Laos stretched the range limitations of the RF-101C Voodoos. This increased the requirement for aerial refueling, and presented a case for using bases in Thailand and northern South Vietnam. Therefore, the 2nd Air Division proposed relocating six 101s to either Don Muang or Udorn. The aircraft could more economically use Takhli tankers and fighter escort from that base or from Korat. However, Ambassador Unger and State opposed extension of the Lao reconnaissance program. ⁴

³ An additional 36-53 jet interceptors were received by the end of December.

⁴ Segment sources:
Intelligence Memorandum, SC #05780/64, Communist Military Posture and Capabilities Vis-à-vis Southeast Asia: Communist Air Developments and Air Defense Measures, 12/31/64, 1.
CHECO.
Edward Greenhalgh, 63-64.
Leonard Unger to State, 08/07/64.
State, Halpern, 08/09/64.
Edward Marolda, Fitzgerald, 470.

Directly following the Tonkin Gulf incident and observed build-up of enemy air, the Strategic Air Command (SAC) delivered Ryan 147 RPV drones to Southeast Asia. First operational in July 1963, they were launched from C-130s to become a primary source of photo intelligence in sensitive areas of North Vietnam, off limits to the unarmed Voodoo planes.

Between August 1964 and January 1965, the U.S. Navy prepared for a widening war that many astute leaders foresaw. The Seventh Fleet deployed additional surface and air units, sealift ships, aircraft, and weapons in the Western Pacific. More storage and handling facilities were erected at logistic facilities, and stocks of ordnance, equipment, and general supplies were increased.

Naval leaders developed plans for major combat actions in North Vietnam, and were prominent among strategists favoring stringent measures to discourage and restrain the Vietnamese from pursuing their goals in South Vietnam and Laos. However, key administration officials and military leaders were apprehensive that such escalation would stimulate overt Chinese and Vietnamese participation. Therefore, for a time, covert measures were the norm and operational restrictions limited effectiveness in deterring North Vietnamese goals. ⁵

OPERATIONS

By the fourth, Hotel-21 was repaired and towed out of the barn. Wayne Knight tested and released the machine for local operations. Still under the guise of a test flight (for which the Customer paid), Mike Marshall first demonstrated, and then allowed Bobby Nunez to fly a few easy approaches. Bob was a

⁵ Ed Marolda, Fitzgerald, Preparations for an Expanded Conflict, 492-93.

willing and able student, but Mike, like Wayne, also recognized that Nunez had never worked a reciprocating engine helicopter before and required a lot of training. ⁶

To be fair, Wayne attempted to provide Bob with as much local time as possible in an aircraft he was completely unfamiliar with before going upcountry.

The next morning, Mike and Wayne, with Stevens riding in the belly, launched early for Long Tieng. They arrived before I got started for the day to swap Hotel-21 with Hotel-19. As it was Mike's route check, the two worked a couple of missions around Long Pot before returning to Udorn.

Stevens joined me for two days work at Paksane. Because the piney woods of the Paksane area offered relatively flat terrain and normally afforded only a low intensity conflict, it was a preferred initial training area for new pilots. To the south, portions of the Pakse "resort" area were similar in topography to Paksane, but certainly did not offer equal creature comforts. Paksane was reasonably close to Udorn, and the line of sight provided adequate communications to relocate a ship to another area. Because of his background, Steve had previously acquired a taste of mountain flying before we serviced the flats.

Not all the naive new pilots appreciated Paksane's benefits as an initial training/familiarization area. At one time, I had a new pilot with me during a day trip. Following an uneventful day, we returned to Udorn and he quit, claiming that the work was too challenging for him. We probably saved his life, for he might have suffered a coronary attack working in actual mountain conditions.

⁶ Mike Marshall Email, 08/08/99.

THE QUESTION OF SEATING

With the influx of First Officers, and more in the pipeline waiting to enter our program, the burden increased on us line pilots to train the new men upcountry. In an increasingly dangerous theater, we were now expected to perform our normal jobs (to include SARs), and instruct a man in how to fly in the mountains. If the newbies possessed a great deal of H-34 time and were former Marine pilots, there was normally minimum difficulty transitioning them upcountry. Even so, once leaving the Pensacola Training Command, I had noted little standardization in Fleet Marine Corps aviation. Hopefully drawing a good squadron instructor, you learned his technique and followed by example. When the Company hired Marine and Army pilots with logged H-34 time, it was assumed that they had already developed a high degree of H-34 proficiency. Therefore, during the early years, there was no ground or flight-training syllabus available, and little effort by Air America to train these individuals in mountain flying skills. Unless a senior pilot took pains to show a new man the ropes and tutor him, the First Officer was obligated to observe the PIC, and then, after upgrading, to employ on-the-job-training (OJT) to develop his own techniques, and hopefully conduct reversible mistakes.

The ability to perform was not deemed the same with all cross-service personnel. After completing service careers, few pilots actually possessed much high altitude helicopter experience. This was especially the case in the underpowered H-34 at altitude. Moreover, it strained the conditions that we had developed during a more relaxed period. Furthermore, all of us were still learning, evidenced by my latest episode with Hotel-21. With the increase in new and unimproved pads, good aircraft feel, reflexes, and RPM control were essential ingredients of pilot technique when making approaches to a landing zone. A

great deal of pilot skill relied on natural talent and common sense, qualities one was not able to teach, and not evident in all individuals. Therefore, flying with individuals having obtained disparate training fostered more than normal daily stress.

Udorn management preferred that Captains permit newbies to fly from the right seat. Since the Company did not pay for instruction duties, none of us were designated, or compensated, in the capacity of an IP. Therefore, initial local training was left to the CPH or his designee. The office types did conduct some upcountry training, but most of this burden was fostered on us line pilots. ⁷

Although a rated, experienced helicopter pilot, Bob Nunez's deficiency in the H-34 constituted a thorny problem for line Captains tasked to fly with him. Should we let him fly or not? From the start of training new hires, especially those who were deficient, a question arose with us Captains as to the machine's responsibility in case of an accident, while a new pilot was flying from either the right or left seat. Not allowed to make such a difficult decision, Udorn management deferred to headquarters Taipei for an answer. Apparently, it remained a controversial subject, for it required substantial time and several messages to obtain a firm ruling from the head shed. In the end, Taipei specified that the PIC was responsible for the aircraft, regardless of the phase of operation.

This edict was ill received by those of us in Udorn. Charlie Weitz, a highly respected peer, who usually set the trend for the majority in flying matters, vocally declared that

⁷ As was the subject of SARs, for many years, this was a typical response to Taipei management's naivete and unconcern for our problems and status in the Lao operation. It eventually took many years and a nasty industrial action to modify archaic Company policies.

he would not allow new arrivals to fly in the right seat of his helicopter. Naturally, when Charlie spoke in clear terms regarding any subject, people listened, and there was never a misconception of his meaning. Under the circumstances fostered on us, Charlie's unwritten policy seemed reasonable, so, unless the First Officer displayed outstanding characteristics, many of us followed Weitz's example. Aside from the fact that I had painfully earned the right to occupy the PIC seat, one did seem to have more control over the flying, Flight Mechanics, and loading process while sitting in the right seat. However, most of this thinking was psychological. In my mind, except for brakes that had to be set prior to landing on sloped landing zones, a rarely used relief tube, rearview mirror, hoist operation capability, and a manual external hook release, it really did not matter which seat one sat in while in the cockpit. Granted, with the window open, it was a great deal noisier in the left seat because of the exhaust stack's location, and the throttle did have a slightly different feel, but controls and instrumentation were virtually the same on both sides.

When Wayne Knight first arrived in Udorn to fly helicopters as a line pilot, there was never any question regarding extra pay while instructing a new man or during area familiarization. Pilots were expected to allow a new pilot to fly and then report on his progress. ⁸

During the current flap there was little that local management could actually do to influence the situation. Therefore, skirting the issue, the CPH initially attempted to schedule senior pilots who he believed would permit others to fly from the right seat. If none were available in this

⁸ EW Knight Email, 07/01/00.

category, management allowed the designated PIC to decide how he wanted to treat the situation. This was a reasonable solution from our perspective, for unless a First Officer was scheduled with us, most men preferred to fly solo.

LIMA-39

While rotating to Paksane to work, I normally flew a direct backdoor route over Padong Ridge and past Site-65. However, because of yet uncontested areas around Tha Vieng, Tha Thom, and poor weather, I went through the gap behind Phou Khao and flew over Vang Pao's farm at Moung Cha. Then I followed the Nam Teng tributary southeast, until intersecting the larger Ngiap River that flowed almost to Lima-39. The trip was relatively long, but probably consumed about the same time had I flown south toward Vientiane and then turned east following the Mekong to my destination. The choice proved quite interesting. We flew low along surging rivers that sliced through sheer, deep chasms too narrow to support even one village. In addition to enjoying a pristine example of geological evolution, we were not exposed to enemy fire. Finally, we broke out of the mountains into level forest eighteen miles above the river town.

General Kham Khong's troops were attempting to accomplish their part in rolling back earlier communist gains. Since the previous month, I was heartened by some army progress moving toward Tha Thom. Working out of the Borikhane (LS-129) strip, we shuttled troops and supplies to various forward outposts and listening sites throughout the area. That night, after parking and securing the aircraft, while "C" greased the H-34s numerous component zerk fittings, a duty driver Jeoped us to the general's quarters. Surprisingly, the general invited us in to his small parlor, where he was eating from a plate containing bloody looking cherry clams. I was acquainted with New Jersey

shore clams, particularly the delicious steamers, and the Manhattan clam chowder Mom created. However, what he offered was foreign to me. Instead of a thin, smooth shell, these shells appeared thick and heavily ribbed. After learning about liver flukes, I was suspicious of any shellfish, or a shell that remotely looked like a snail. Our host must have noted my hesitation, because he indicated they were from the ocean and well steamed. Right. Slightly reassured, and not wanting to appear rude, I hesitantly ate one and discovered it very tasty, although the unpalatable Lao supper of weeds and smelly fish that followed had not improved.

Staying overnight at the house of a man of such stature was a first for Steve, and I could tell he was equally impressed as I had been the first time. Really, the general was an astute individual, who obviously used psychology with subordinates. By treating us well and taking us into his confidence, he knew we were more apt to adopt an added interest in the job and work harder for the government cause.

Thursday was a long day. After working two fuel loads around Paksane, we returned Vang Pao's officers to Long Tieng. They had arrived previously to talk with Kham Khong's staff regarding guerrilla movements in coordination with attempts to retake Tha Thom. After depositing them, we returned to Udorn.

I bought "C" dinner and a couple of beers at the Club. We were almost finished when Wayne passed our table. I suppose seeing the two of us together surprised him, and he said something that somewhat bothered me. Recalling my hairy episode on the high pad, I was a little paranoid and wondered if he suspected any collusion with "C" to cover up the actual details of what had occurred. Later, I wondered if he or someone in the Maintenance Department had quizzed Decosta.

The cost of Hotel-21's repair must have exceeded a specified limit, or there was some doubt in the CPH's mind about my crash, for Wayne asked me to prepare a written incident report. Without admitting I had completely screwed up, I attempted to explain in short, concise, half-truth language what happened: That upon observing numerous stumps on short final, I attempted to wave off to the right and was committed to an unscheduled landing. The statement skirted the facts, of which by that time had become blurred even in my own mind, as a protective device to mask the seconds of pure terror. Wayne apparently accepted my explanation at face value, for he merely smiled, asked no further questions, and that was the last I heard concerning the subject.

While preparing for annual leave, I began looking for a secure place to store my two radios and Olympia script typewriter. Despite the dog's presence, the house was not that secure and Sang was frequently absent. I owned few household items and those I did were not particularly expensive, but they were not easily replaceable and I relied on them. I knew that Charlie Weitz had stored his valuables in the Air America supply warehouse before going on leave, so I explored the same option. However, when I asked M.F. Santos, the elderly manager of the supply building, if I could place my green footlocker in the warehouse for safekeeping, Santos refused. I reminded him that Charlie had left his personal possessions with him, but he only shrugged, and refused to discuss the subject. His meaning was crystal clear, but not the true reason. As to this, I could only speculate. His refusal to accommodate me could have stemmed from one or more factors: Perhaps some subsequent problem had altered the non-policy, or Santos did not want to assume the responsibility, or Charlie had crossed his palm with cash, which I did not offer, or perhaps he connected me with last year's American-Filipino supermarket incident, or he was lording his authority over the Westerner, or he just did not like me. Whatever the reason, it forever remained in limbo. I did not want to leave my goods with another pilot, for the risks of thievery were much the same anywhere in town, so I had little other choice than to lock the trunk and leave everything at the house. ¹

¹ Years later I encountered Santos, and was shocked at the man's sallow complexion and general appearance. It was obvious that the man was not well, and soon afterward, he suffered a heart attack and died.

While marking time until departing for Bangkok, on the 11th, Wayne captured me to test Hotel-17. Bobby Nunez accompanied Louie Moser and me on the flight that turned into more of a familiarization and training exercise. I found Nunez friendly, an able person willing to learn, but not an extrovert. He was realistic and resigned to the fact that his H-34 inexperience would keep him a First Officer for a number of months. He said that he had flown the Boeing 107 helicopter between Kennedy, La Guardia, and Newark airports and the Pan American building for New York Airways. This was a civilian version of the same helicopter the Marine Corps purchased when I rotated to Okinawa. It was impossible to know for sure, but I wondered if I had flown with him to New York International while returning to Southeast Asia.

After lunch, Hotel-17 required another test flight. During the process, a man dressed in civvies approached me on the ramp for an AB-1-sanctioned flight. I could not tell if he was an Air Force type, a spook, or both. He indicated that he wanted to fly a few miles into the northeast to look for a missing reconnaissance drone suspected down in the area. I recalled U.S. Navy drones being tested on the shore at Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico, in 1960, and was interested in the subject. Despite my inquiry, he did not divulge much. Apparently, the device had recently been introduced into Southeast Asia and there were still bugs in the air-to-air recovery system. My passenger indicated that the pilotless photo intelligence mechanism was returning from southern China when the signal was lost.

I tuned to the appropriate UHF frequency and attempted to home on the beacon. After forty minutes of grinding around the

countryside, when no signal or evidence of a crashed drone materialized, we RTB Udorn.

Writing a check to Flight Mechanic Joe Marlin, I obtained one hundred dollars in baht (2,000 baht) to cover Sang and Caesar's living expenses at Sopa Villa while I was on leave.

We learned that five more H-34s had arrived from a USMTS ship at Port Klong Toey south of Bangkok, and were offloaded on the dock. However, because of convoluted Thai government red tape, or pressure to receive other USG goodies, the machines had not been released to Air America. When and if they entered our inventory more pilots would be required. Certainly, at least near term, any aircraft additions would add substantially to our monthly flight hours. Anything over seventy hours that we bumped up against lately was considered overtime and an additional ten dollars per hour. Although I could use the time off, I wondered if I was doing the right thing in taking leave at this particular time.

Before leaving for Bangkok, I saw Lou McCasland at the airfield. Recently returned from five days upcountry with Scratch and Marius, except for one trip to Houa Moung, he worked the identical Moung Soui and Long Pot areas as my last RON. He returned with a playful baby ocelot and palm civet cat for Joan. The previous month, while Joan was negotiating with the Company to teach, we resumed playing tennis at the RTA compound. I liked and trusted Lou, therefore, I gave him 500 baht and a request to purchase items for the food fund in my absence.

After clearing customs at Kennedy Airport, for the next three weeks, I accomplished all I intended in Plainfield and New York City. I discovered that people did not know anything or very little, nor did they care about what was occurring in Southeast Asia. While retrieving dry cleaning at G.O. Keller on Seventh Street, where I had worked for a few weeks during one

summer vacation, I struck up a conversation with Fran, one of my more comely former workers. She seemed to typify the naiveté of a brain dead person on the street, and was surprised when I predicted an imminent Indochina war. I left shaking my head, trying to understand the logic of a woman and mother. I was more than a little concerned when Ted, elder brother of the Fort boys who had grown up across the street from my parents' house shouted, "*I hear you are working for the CIA.*" Naturally, I was shocked and asked him his source of the information. I denied all Agency affiliation, but was anxious and embarrassed, as I was aware that the National Security Agency, or other similar agencies, conducted periodic neighborhood checks regarding Air America employees. The information could only have come from Dad, so, without admitting to anything, I urged him not to converse or speculate with neighbors concerning my work. ²

² Unfortunately, as an Air America interviewer in Taipei later advised Mike Jarina, I had never been briefed to indicate to the curious that I merely hauled innocuous items like rice, rooftops, and refugees.

The day I departed Bangkok for the States, two Thai-piloted RT-28s were hit by 37mm fire in the Ban Ban Valley while photographing a bridge and caves deemed lucrative targets. The more seriously hit Firefly pilot managed to fly southwest, but crashed in an area believed southeast of Phou Keng.

DET-6 Commander Barney Cochran had conceived a sound plan to photograph and then take out 37mm guns the enemy hid and deployed from caves. A highflying T-28 flight would proceed over the area and attack the gunners, while a RT-28 pilot flew by at low level taking pictures of the caves. Despite being the best reconnaissance pilot in the group, the Thai man paid the ultimate price.

Twenty-five T-28 sorties were flown in support of SAR operations south of Phou Keng looking for the downed aircraft and aviator until low overcast conditions prevented further operations.

When discovered, the T-28 and its sensitive photo equipment would be destroyed. F-105s would be used. Therefore, Cochran flew to Korat that night to brief the squadron commanding officer about the area and correct tactics to employ on the bombing runs. His advice was not well received, and the commander curtly retorted that F-105 tactics differed from those used by T-28 pilots.

Marking the first time F-105s flew combat in Laos, four flights of U.S. jet aircraft launched the following morning to participate in the SAR. Waterpump operations officer Frank McCallister waited in the Air America control ship to direct the strikes. Barney Cochran observed from a Helio Courier.

The mission began unraveling when one flight was unable to contact Victor Control because of temporary radio failure. Another flight aborted because of foul weather. Using stateside practice area bombing techniques in a hostile area, planes were damaged by enemy ground fire, but safely RTB. The remaining planes expended 20mm cannon fire and rockets on enemy positions. From the mission abortion, it was patently obvious that the Air Force tactics used would have to be reviewed and modified. ¹

Mike Marshall flew Hotel-15 upcountry on the twelfth. He and Flight Mechanic Lacsina worked out of Sam Tong for two days supporting operations around Moung Cha and Moung Soui. On Friday, he was assigned SAR duty at Delta. About mid-day, the operations manager called the radio operator instructing Mike to launch. ² Since this marked his first actual call out since assuming SAR duty, he was shocked. Ill prepared, he was wearing low-top shoes, not his regular flight boots. While waiting for an actual pilot sighting to enter the SAR area, he orbited southeast of San Luang. During the waiting phase, his Flight Mechanic pleaded with him not to venture onto the Plain, but Mike, then fully committed, had little choice in the matter. To forestall Lacsina's reluctance and whining, he decided to discharge the man at a friendly site. Before he could implement this, Dutch Brongersma, flying a Cessna over the downed area, reported that there could not possibly be a survivor. Shortly after this, the SAR was aborted.

¹ Ken Conboy, 112.
AIRA Vientiane, 08/14/64.
Joe Leeker, A Good Example of Cooperation: Operation Triangle, 19-20.
Bill Leary 1964 Notes, UTD.

² Despite the Charles Klusmann incident in June, our helicopters were still dispatched single pilot, and often without air cover.

The following day Mike went to Long Tieng to await further developments. The Thai pilot's body was found by ground troops, and Vientiane wanted the man retrieved, but Tony realistically would not risk a helicopter and crew for this task. RONIing at Sam Tong, Mike worked four additional days before returning to his family.

Later, while enjoying a beer in the Club bar and discussing the incident, Mike indicated that he would never risk his helicopter and crew to retrieve a body under fire. Ed Reid took exception to Marshall's statement and angrily shouted that if that was his attitude then he should go home. After all that had happened to him recently, Mike retorted that perhaps he would. ³

Z-MAN

Bill Zeitler was not finished spinning his childish pranks. Post Triangle, our helicopters began working almost daily at and around Mounng Soui. However, the loading people and RO personnel were relatively disorganized compared to the more experienced folks at Long Tieng or Sam Tong, and there was normally not enough fuel or work available to keep two ships busy all day. Therefore, Billy dug deep into his sneaky bag of tricks to send Howard Estes on a bogus mission far removed from Lima-108.

During a lull in activity, Z-Man radioed Howard to switch to a FM frequency and standby for a message. Then, disguising his voice to sound like a Customer, he ordered Estes to retrieve a person from a remote northern site. When in the area, Estes was told to call over the FM radio to receive final approval to land. Not recognizing Z's ruse, Howard departed and sweat bullets while flying deep into enemy territory. Arriving over

³ Mike Marshall Flight Time Record, August 1964.
Marshall Letter, Circa 09/20/92.
Mike Marshall Emails, 08/08/99 (2).

the pad, Estes called as briefed. He was advised not to land and to immediately RTB Moung Soui. In the meantime, Billy had completed all work in the area. For some time, Howard had no idea that he had been hoodwinked, but word of the hoax eventually spread to all hands. ⁴

When it became my turn for Zeitler to prank, I was flying over the southern Plain of Jars. I was surprised to hear what sounded like a foreign voice over FM calling my side number, telling me to proceed to a certain place. The voice sounded familiar, but since we suspected that enemy English speakers monitored Company frequencies obtained from radios after numerous aircraft downings, I was not entirely certain of the source--at least not at first. As the banter continued, I became more convinced it was Billy Z attempting to suck me into one of his games, so I played along with the "bad guy" and introduced a few choice words of my own. Finally, no longer able to contain himself, he began chortling and the joke was revealed. ⁵

BILLY Z'S MOMENT OF TRUTH

Dave Hickler arrived in Vientiane to assume the General Manager-Laos slot when Roy Stitt departed on extended home

⁴ As a Mea Culpa, years later, Zeitler later admitted to the Author that he enjoyed practical jokes because he was bored flying. Bill stated that *"some of my childish pranks have come back to haunt me with warped versions, usually to enhance the deed, not to denigrate me, but if you weren't there, the interpretations take on a whole new life. Some of us felt the pervasive boredom, as I really did, and saw humor in tormenting some of those around us. I know I wouldn't have done it any differently, but I would have humbly apologized as a form of self-retribution more often. Of course, we were all on the receiving end at one time or another. I just felt I always had the ability to respond in like kind. I think this was a form of self-defense."*

⁵ Mike Marshall Letters.
Bill Zeitler Interview, 09/01/01.
Zeitler Email, 09/04/01.

leave. While still in Taipei, superiors instructed Dave on how to conduct Company business. This included devoting full attention to daily flight and ground operations, and working closely with CIA personnel.

Quickly gaining crewmember support and respect, Dave and his amiable personality fit perfectly into the mix of things. He discovered that flying in Laos was exciting and extremely dangerous. Beside mountains, weather, short landing strips, and numerous other hazards to aviation, Company pilots had to deal with hostile forces in most areas where they flew. He found that the brave, dedicated, and competent pilots believed in accomplishing the mission, and never wavered in their duties.

Perhaps the most challenging aspects of Hickler's responsibilities while in Vientiane were Company SAR missions. He later reflected on his participation during SAR operations:

"After losing a plane to ground fire in the course of delivering rice, 'hard rice,' or other equipment used in the Lao war, Air America's available planes began a Search and Rescue effort. Aware that pilots or crewmembers might be in imminent danger or capture by PL troops, he alerted T-28 approved pilots of possible action. Next, he notified the CIA station of a lost plane. Then he called Ambassador Unger [in later 1964 Ambassador Sullivan], requesting permission to utilize T-28s. Approval was generally authorized after explaining all details and emphasizing that bombs and machineguns were necessary to save the downed people."

In the beginning, policy required the ambassador to contact Washington for approval to introduce Air America's offensive assets. Two-way message traffic presented a slow process. Delays cost men's lives, resulted in tight situations, and battle damage (Author's words). With a mobile enemy, time was of the

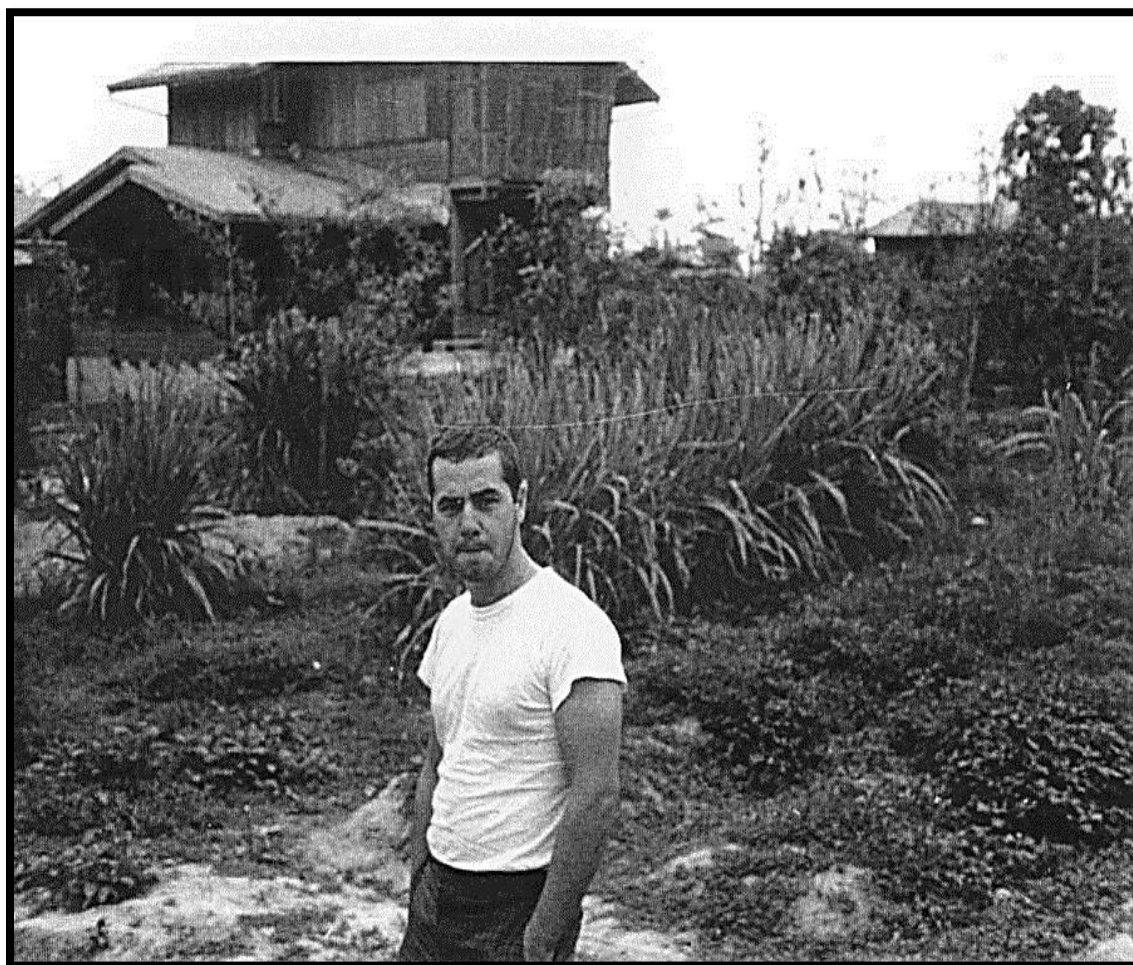
essence in retrieving a downed man; therefore, the process was later rectified to some extent.

Air America not only provided T-28 SAR escort missions for Company employees, but also for downed USAF, U.S. Navy, Thai-Lao, and competitive company pilots. Over time, Hickler amassed numerous letters of thanks from high-ranking military officers for services Air America provided in saving crewmember's lives. SAR's were conducted and performed under the auspices of valid USG employees including the ambassador, the CIA COS, and his subordinate staff.

Despite early success in the case of Commander Lynn's timely rescue, not all Company SAR operations succeeded satisfactorily. As with most new hurried and ill-conceived concepts, there was still a lot to learn and hard work to be accomplished in creating viable SOPs, and coordination between disparate agencies. The stark reality of early deficiencies was apparent when Bill Zeitler became the first UH-34D pilot shot down during my tenure with Air America.

Following the loss of the Firefly pilot on the 14th, a conference was held at the Vientiane Air Operations Center to critique and assess program goals and tactics. Charged with administrative responsibility for the Udorn-based T-28 B-Team, Lieutenant Colonel Tavashi Viriyapong (Tavat Davatchai), Commanding Officer of the Thai 223 Starlight Fighter Squadron, attended the meeting. I had previously met the popular colonel during Ben Moore's required attendance at the airport terminal opening party.

Following the meeting, despite a mandate from his superiors not to fly upcountry, he and one of his pilots, Lieutenant Tera, flew north to survey the Plain of Jars area of operations where his pilots were working. At 1115 hours, while cruising over the



Bill Zeitler at his Udorn housing compound.
Nick Burke Collection.

Xieng Khouang Ville area, 37mm fire badly disabled the T-28. Able to head southeast to a position located a few miles northeast of Ban Peung (LS-95) on the eastern flank of Phou Sao, the pilots elected to bail into enemy controlled territory close to alternate bypass Route-42. ⁶

Thus far, it had been a very satisfactory month for flight time, with most helicopter pilots approaching or exceeding the overtime requirement of seventy hours.

On the 17th, Mike Marshall and Billy Z worked fringes of the southwest Plain of Jars and Moung Soui area. This included transiting close to Route-7 while flying to the Meo site at Phou So (LS-57). Mike was a half mile behind Billy, passing a friendly village, when he observed airbursts below and to the rear of Zeitler's helicopter. Puzzled, Mike could not understand how bad guys could be in that friendly area. He switched to FM and said, "*Zeitler, break right. You are taking AAA fire.*"

Z-Man coolly replied, "*Oh, really? That must be coming from a truck mounted gun,*" then he continued toward the destination.

With clamped jaws, Marshall searched in all directions and anxiously awaited another airburst. Despite being well beyond the village, another explosion occurred at the same location behind Billy's ship. The scenario was too obvious, and with Zeitler's dubious reputation for pranks, Mike began smelling a rat. At the same time, laughing, Bill explained on FM that he and "Pappy" had been pitching grenades from the helicopter. After his recent July encounter, Mike did not appreciate or need such "humor."

⁶ Ken Conboy, 112-113.
Department of Air Force Message, 08/18/64.

At the time of the T-28 downing, Dick Elder was conducting a VIP flight to recently liberated Moung Kassy with correspondent "Fanny" Arbuckle.⁷ Alerted to the aircraft loss, he proceeded to Long Tieng where he refueled to participate in the SAR.

Marshall was flying missions out of Sam Tong on the last day of his RON when he heard a blanket relay call "in the blind" for helicopter assistance. He was going to head for the downed coordinates to help, but he was low on fuel and unfamiliar with the area. Cover aircraft had not arrived, so he informed Vientiane that he was heading for Long Tieng.

Dick Elder was waiting there preparing to launch. At this time, no one was aware that two Thai pilots were principals of the SAR. Since the Klusmann SAR, the logical thinking in our group assumed that any downing involved an American.

Captain Gary Malmberg and Les Strouse, crewing Caribou 392, had already launched. Assigned Victor Control, they awaited cover aircraft. When Elder arrived in the area, they were already drawing ground fire.

Before long, Dick spotted what he believed was a parachute and pilot in the jungle. He was located on a 020 degree heading five miles from Site-95. The terrain was hilly at a 4,000-foot level. After making a slow pass and contemplating a hoist recovery, he determined that he was too heavy to hover and attempt a pick-up. Furthermore, the area was too hot to attempt a landing, so he decided to land at Ban Peung, lighten the ship, and alert the Meo ADC about the situation.

Bill Zeitler overheard Dick talking to the PIC of 392 on the Company VHF radio frequency and asked what he was doing. Since 0700 hours, Bill had been working out of Moung Cha and LS-

⁷ Because of favorable by-lines, Arbuckle was the sole reporter sanctioned by the Agency to ride on Company aircraft.

65 hauling meat to troops in a sizeable valley to the east. Coordinating with Kham Khong's FAR, Vang Pao's Meo guerrillas were conducting a large operation supporting government efforts to reclaim the Tha Thom Valley. Learning that Dick was too heavy to attempt a rescue, and having burned off most of his fuel, he headed for Site-95 to offer assistance.

Not long before Bill's RON, a rare APM was held to discuss continuing problems and deficiencies associated with SAR operations. Jack McMahon again conducted the meeting. Because of his abrasive personality, inflexibility, and reluctance to answer pertinent questions, Jack was considered a poor choice to moderate any worthwhile discussion. In addition, the pilots did not believe he understood their problems. Based in Bangkok in an administration billet, he was entirely divorced from field operations. Several issues were discussed. Pilots were losing up to four hours regular pay during ground standbys. This was especially troublesome when they reached an overtime threshold of seventy hours. In such cases, they forfeited twenty dollars per hour while on the ground. Since standbys were still conducted single pilot, they desired a dual cockpit crew and another H-34 if actually launched on an SAR. This was the first time pilots requested pay for standby missions. All were angry with management, particularly since it was common knowledge that Alpha pilots earned high hourly pay regardless of their T-28 missions. Reiterating the same argument he had during the first meeting, McMahon referred to us "old timers" as "Plank Owners," an archaic and largely disused U.S Navy term that none of us had a clue regarding its meaning. ⁸ Then he commented that all pilots

⁸ Plank Owners: Likely a term originally derived from the British Navy, and adopted as slang by the U.S. Navy. A Plank Owner was a crewmember of a newly commissioned ship. McMahon probably used the archaic term in referring to us as a small, but elite unit.

knew they would do the job if the situation warranted. Jack's words were accurate, in that, when the call came, all did participate.

When Captain Elder arrived at Ban Peung, he observed smoke on the horizon from the crashed T-28. While his Flight Mechanic removed radios, excess gear, and cabin windows, Dick informed the local commanding officer of the problem and requested that he supply him with automatic weapons and shooters.

While Zeitler approached the site in Hotel-19, they conversed over the radio and both decided, as Bill had the lighter ship, that he would attempt the rescue. In the meantime, "Pappy" completed positioning a local BAR man at a window, and a .30 caliber machine gunner in the door to help silence ground fire and provide Billy Z cover.

Dick led Bill to the downing site. What remained of the T-28 was on the side of a hill. After making one low pass and discovering someone on the ground, it did not appear that there was a decent place to land. From his higher vantage point, Dick spied what looked like an open rice field with a large, prominent rock about fifty yards from the pilot. He recommended that Bill hover into the clearing and let the man walk to him. The clearing was deceptive. Bill made another low pass to what he later discovered was a bamboo and foliage covered bowl below a ridge that only appeared to be flat jungle from altitude. Hovering toward the spot, wondering if this situation constituted a Klusmann like trap, he was surprised to see two brown-skinned men dressed in one-piece flight suits scrambling up the side of a hill toward him. One supported the other and they flashed huge, toothy smiles toward the cockpit that more than likely identified them as Thai.

Bill held a steady hover, while Pascual lowered the hoist cable. At this time, ground fire erupted from the north that

soared over the ship. In his zeal to assist, Elder, who was also under fire, descended and flew over Hotel-19 creating considerable downwash that destroyed some of Hotel-19's rotor lift and almost caused Z to crash. Unable to maintain a hover, Billy realized that he had to become airborne. During the process, the cable dragged through trees and bamboo, but fortunately it did not snag on anything. He decided to conduct another attempt and asked Dick to suppress enemy ground fire, while he began the approach. By this time, everyone overhead was excited, and shouted over the radios, so he pleaded with everyone for a few moments of silence.

During the next approach, he backed slowly into the area to allow more flexibility. He was wearing an old, dirty flak jacket recently introduced into the Air America supply system by Air Force logistics personnel. He sat on the short pants that formed part of the outfit. Suddenly something walloped his lower back hard and he felt pain in his left foot. This was immediately followed by the aircraft controls freezing, indicating severe servo or linkage damage. With little control over his fate, attempting to relax, he sat upright in the seat, while musing about what it was like to die. Next, the tail dropped, causing him to believe the tail rotor had been seriously damaged. Then the ship plunged into the thicket, struck the side of the bowl, and rolled onto its left side.

Bill was stunned. His Technicolor binocular world changed to grays, blacks, and whites. For a split second, he experienced a detached, surreal feeling and saw himself screaming. Then, returning to reality, he attempted to abandon the cockpit. However, he was still tightly strapped and buckled to the seat. Also delaying and impeding a quick egress, his helmet electrical cord was still attached to the jack. He realized that if he was going to survive, he had better start to think more clearly.

Previously recommended by a racetrack driver friend to survive fire, he had instinctively hyperventilated before the crash. He frantically beat both hands and knuckles raw trying to exit the cockpit. With smoke beginning to enter the cockpit, he managed to break out into fresh air. Even though he could not see well out of his right eye, color vision slowly returned.

Fearing the worst, he began screaming for Pappy. Not receiving an answer, he began crawling across the fuselage and was about to pull himself into the cargo compartment when the ship exploded.⁹ Still wearing his helmet, Zeitler was blown a considerable distance upslope. In addition to suffering flash burns to his face and hands, most of his clothes were destroyed and he lost one shoe. Realizing that he had to move away from the danger of the blazing helicopter, he panicked. He cautiously moved around the bowl, but his foot pained him considerably and he fell several times. Believing that he had broken a bone, he was still unsure if he had been wounded.

Unknown to him, there was an enemy camp adjacent to the area. Somehow, the bad guys were aware that he had survived the crash and fire, and were pursuing him. Still unaware that he was in a bowl, instead of moving directly away from the helicopter, he circled the perimeter, ending back at Hotel-19. In retrospect, this action might have prevented his capture. Finally, he slid and crawled downhill toward a small stream and sank down beside a broken tree.

As Dick Elder rolled out of a 360 degree turn and commenced a firing run on suspected enemy gunners, he observed the smoking helicopter on the ground. In addition to Victor Control, there

⁹ Explosion and fire was a common denominator during violent crashes. Located in the lower left hand clutch compartment, ruptured battery cables could short and emit sparks. This, coupled with gas fumes, generally precipitated a fire.

was a USAF rescue aircraft (Call sign Crown) crew in the area, who acknowledged his Mayday calls. Ironically, Dick discovered that he had once served with a person onboard the plane. Seeing no evidence of life around Hotel-19, he flew back to Site-95, and excitedly asked the Meo commanding officer to immediately dispatch troops toward the downed helicopter. Then he returned to the site and loitered. Finally, when low on fuel, he climbed IMC through the clouds and RTB Long Tieng where he informed Tony of Billy's crash and awaited further instructions.

When Elder arrived at The Alternate, Marshall was still awaiting a ride home. Learning that no survivors were sighted, Mike realized it could have been him in the weeds and thought, *"Holy Shit, I think I will go back to Texas."* Determining that he was less than invincible after his traumatic July incident in the weeds, he had been seriously concerned about his mortality. Conflicted, he asked Tony if he should double up with Elder or Jack Connor, then working at a northern site. Tony, realizing what Mike had experienced recently, compassionately told him to go home.

Captain Gary Malmberg witnessed the crash. When Zeitler first entered the area and indicated that he intended to descend and search, Gary asked him to wait for air cover. However, realizing that the time element for rescue was short, Billy continued to march. Shortly afterward, the crew of 392 observed the H-34 roll over, catch fire, and explode. During this sequence, Gary saw one or more men jump free of the fire. To ascertain if survivors actually existed, he descended and began a low pass over the area. Heavy ground fire commenced. They were first aware that the Caribou was nailed when Bobby Herald, while kneeling on a seat, observed a round penetrate the fuselage and strike a cargo tie-down bag.

General Manager Dave Hickler learned about the upcountry situation after returning from town about 1400 hours. He was monitoring the radio when Gary began calling "Drop Kick," an innocuous radio term recently adopted to replace the international Mayday call and not tip the enemy off as to an impending SAR. ¹⁰ Senior Operations Manager Larry Joseph failed to comprehend what Gary was trying to convey, so the exasperated pilot finally screamed, "*Send the fucking fighters!*" Before Gary left to refuel, U.S. Navy Skyraider pilots responded to the call for aircraft and were supposedly illegally proceeding into Lao territory.

Malmberg and First Officer Strouse remained in the area until relieved by Fred Walker, "Big Andy" Anderson, and kicker Jack Fogarty in Caribou 443. When Walker reached Phu Bia, weather became a hindrance to progress. However, after circumnavigating thunderstorms to the east, they managed to reach the target area.

After Malmberg landed at Wattay Airport, the crew discovered that one of the sixteen rounds that hit 392 had damaged an aileron bell crank, effectively grounding the ship.

In addition to Ambassador Leonard Unger and two staff members, Air Attaché, Colonel Tyrell; Operations Manager, Larry Joseph; FIC Chief, Bill Solin; Assistant Station Manager, T.C. Walker; General Manager, Dave Hickler; and Assistant Operations Manager, Tom Krohn were all attempting to make sense out of the incident and react in an appropriate manner. Since Malmberg had been flying cover at the downing site, relaying critical information through Tom Krohn, and had knowledge of the Hotel-19 crash, he was invited to the packed radio room to brief the ambassador and his staff. With expert aplomb, he sketched

¹⁰ Drop Kick: The call also doubled as a code for Alpha pilots to return to Vientiane for a Customer briefing and T-28 duty.

diagrams of the terrain, the location of the ship, direction of ground fire, other related problems, and recommended napalm was the only weapon to use in the environment. All noted that Malmberg was emotionally charged and visibly shaken. Despite constraints from embassy or Washington leaders, he wanted an immediate rescue attempt launched. ¹¹

Malmberg's impassioned words held a great deal of weight with those in the radio room. Unger listened carefully, and then asked appropriate questions. After reflecting a short time, he approved a T-28 support mission to include controversial napalm. However, he stipulated that all villages and houses were off limits to strikes. Only jungle and troop locations could be bombed.

Unger's decision was courageous, for it could have cost him his job. In a private conversation, right after giving the green light to launch the T-28s, he divulged to Hickler that from the beginning of A-Team operations, Secretary Rusk had issued explicit orders never to use American flown T-28s without **prior** Washington approval. However, two-way message traffic required precious time, a delay not warranted in this case.

Unger was conflicted. On one hand, he commiserated with Malmberg's anxiety for the welfare of a fellow aviator and intense desire to rescue a peer. On the other hand, USG had an agreement to abide by Geneva Accords protocols that required Lao neutrality, and he had a responsibility to the American people to honor this pact. The ambassador's concern and difficult job impressed Dave. Therefore, he decided to support the man in all future endeavors.

¹¹ A large man, in recapitulating the incident, Malmberg later told Billy Z that he grabbed Unger's representative by the throat, stating flatly that he was going back to the site.

Before the ambassador arrived at the radio room, anticipating the need for SAR cover, Air America management had dispatched personnel to canvass the town for Alpha pilots to stand by at the field. However, as per State's required sanction, they could not launch the Alphas without the ambassador's approval. After a survey of those in the immediate area, or on the schedule, only three of the six pilots could be found.

Captain Rick Byrne was not scheduled to fly that day and had already enjoyed a beer when Jim Mullens contacted him. There had been a previous pay dispute with Fred Walker regarding a few items relating to the Alpha operation, so a couple of pilots, Rick included, were not going to fly T-28 missions until the issue was resolved. Therefore, he initially refused to participate in the SAR. Mullens was incensed. A fellow pilot was down in the weeds, and he vigorously appealed to Rick to help. Byrne considered this a minute, and then agreed to go out to the airport. After he arrived, he noted an abundance of raw excitement over the two downings. During the standby, Ambassador Unger instructed Rick about the necessity for the judicious use of napalm.

Captain John Wiren was the second Alpha pilot to arrive and await instructions.

Captain Joe Hazen was flying a Helio Courier upcountry. Since the advent of the SAR mission, airborne Alphas, regardless of where they were, were required to check in hourly with the Vientiane radio operator on the HF net. During his scheduled radio call, he received the recall message to RTB Vientiane. Unger, who insisted that nape was only to be employed if the mission dictated, personally briefed him late in the day. At one point, Hazen had to diplomatically terminate the briefing, as it

was late in the afternoon, and, in order to be useful, a timely launch was imperative.

Now all three pilots impatiently waited for approval to launch.

After individually briefing each Alpha pilot, Unger promptly returned to the embassy and penned a short message to State. He reported authorizing American T-28 pilots and Thai/Lao pilots to employ napalm in efforts to rescue the Thai crew downed that morning, and any surviving members of the H-34 shot down during the failed rescue attempt.

Indicating that the area was relatively unpopulated and heavily forested; the heavy ground cover provided the downed men excellent concealment from hostiles.

As early support was ineffective, Air America representatives, the attaché, and pilots familiar with the situation had persuaded him to order napalm to drop along one part of the ridge. If successful, the impressive weapon should permit rescue by helicopters, or by the friendly Meo patrol en route from Site-95.

He ended the message with regrets that the need for his immediate decision had prevented him from obtaining prior authorization to launch the Alphas, particularly with napalm.

Rain began to fall after Billy collapsed. The drops were very painful on his almost naked, flash-burned body. Therefore, he looked around and discovered a plant with large banana like leaves. He broke off two and arranged them over his burned skin, some of which was hanging off an arm. Then, elevating his oozing foot, he lay down again across the cooling stream.

Drizzle continued. Billy was still having trouble with vision from his right eye, and the left was slightly blurred. Despite impaired sight, he could hear people talking and thrashing around in the brush upslope from where he lay. Later,

he heard an aircraft overhead. At the same time, someone splashed downstream toward him wearing an unfamiliar uniform. Bill's chest tightened, as animal fear rose to a panic level. Unarmed, he considered a realistic method of surrender without being killed. "Lady Luck" accompanied Bill that day, for the enemy soldier, distracted by the Caribou overhead, failed to see him. Almost upon Zeitler, he stepped over a log. Bill, relying on his enormous strength and former wrestling skills, dropped the man with a double leg take down. Then he violently twisted and snapped the Vietnamese's neck. After retrieving his rifle, he lay on top of the weakly struggling man. Water finished the job. Afterward, Bill could not hear any aircraft and began to despair of rescue.

By 1600 hours, three Alpha pilots were already en route to the SAR site. Time on target (TOT) was estimated at forty minutes. Other Lao planes also launched, but never reached the area because of weather difficulties. One became lost in another sector of Laos.

Some time after Fred Walker and copilot Roland (Big Andy) Anderson arrived overhead the SAR area, Fred received a radio call on VHF from an Air Force F-100 flight leader with the call sign "Cowboy White."¹² The jet pilot requested Victor Control's position, and then asked for a hold down for a direction finding (DF) steer.

Not long afterward, the flight leader announced that his planes were overhead at 15,000 feet, with the Caribou in sight. Then, using Walker as a forward observer aloft, he offered his services.

The sky cleared east of Phou Sao, something considered unusual during the rainy season, and aircraft began converging

¹² Air America Caribous were also equipped with UHF radio capability, something C-123s lacked at the time.

overhead. Bill attempted to signal them by waving his tattered brown T-shirt. When this failed, he reopened the foot wound and rubbed blood on the shirt. Apparently, the item was visible, for Zeitler heard Captain Sam Jordan's H-34 rotor blades unloading, while descending toward him from high altitude. Heavy ground fire then drove the helicopter pilot away.

The introduction of jet aircraft into the SAR airspace startled the high station C-123 control pilot. "Bandits, Bandits" filled the airwaves in the Air America radio room. There was much consternation for a few moments until the planes were determined to be friendly.

Not long afterward, F-100s, and Air America-piloted T-28s began indiscriminately hosing the area. With PACAF approval, Deputy Air Boss for Laos Affairs at Udorn, Colonel Jack McCreery, had ordered all available aircraft from Korat and Takhli to help his friend, the popular Thai squadron commanding officer. While Captain Jack Connor waited at Site-95 for T-28 cover to arrive, Dick Elder orbited over Phou Sao, where he observed numerous fast movers bombing everything in sight. Attacking in fours, every village in the area seemed to be burning.

Debris from explosions splattered all around Zeitler, and he heard human associated noises thirty yards uphill. Then he observed a helicopter beginning an approach. The sounds above him increased. Apprehensive that another H-34 might be shot down, he considered hiding.

The fighters struck again and a man tumbled downhill toward Bill's location. With renewed hope of rescue, Bill vigorously pummeled the man about the head and shoulders with the captured weapon.

With Fred Walker coordinating the rescue attempt in the low Caribou, and Don Campbell handling high cover in a C-123, Hazen,

Byrne, and Wiren easily spotted the burned area where Hotel-19 had crashed. The Alphas circled the area looking for ground fire, but failed to observe any. Apparently, all the pre-suppressive fire had achieved its purpose.

Cleared into the area from the west, Jack Connor continued his approach. While Hotel-20 settled smoothly over Zeitler, Jack exclaimed in the blind, "*Christ, he is not wearing any clothes.*" Calculated to keep enemy heads down, the T-28 pilots strafed perimeter ridges with .50 caliber rounds. From his position by the door, Stan Wilson hoisted Bill past a mounted machine gun into the cabin, where he became entangled in numerous ammunition belts. He was then flown to Site-20A, where a triple-tailed Bird Pioneer waited to ferry him to Udorn.

After Jack Connor and Stan Wilson departed the scene, John Wiren commenced a final pass to the south, unloading his napalm canisters on the southwest side of the knoll where Hotel-19 crashed. Because of heavy tree and bush growth, he was unable to determine battle damage. He was the only pilot to dispense his napalm, but this fact was not discussed after landing at Wattay Airport.

Rick Byrne was so elated over the rescue that, forgetting he still had canisters attached to wing hard points, he attempted a victory roll and nearly stalled.

With the SAR over, it was time the Air America aircraft and Alpha pilots recovered. Hazen trailed Walker and said, "*Hey Fred?*"

"Yes Joe?"

"You sure are tempting."

Silence followed. Then Fred asked, "*You wouldn't do that.*"

"No, your copilot is a friend of mine." Then Hazen increased power, passed the Caribou, while Wiren and Byrne joined on Hazen for the flight to Wattay.

After securing and disarming, Joe walked to the Air America restaurant where Fred Walker was in the process of consuming a steak. He motioned to Joe to join him. Hazen sat down and ordered a martini. Fred looked at Joe and asked, "*Would you have really done that?*" Joe admitted it was just a joke, but everyone knew that Walker was not a humorous person. ¹³

The elated men remaining in the Udorn radio room monitoring the UHF SAR frequency heard chatter of a final jet strike to take place just before dark at 1820 hours. After calling Winchester (expending all ordinance) and Bingo (low on fuel) they headed south toward an orbiting fuel tanker. However, one F-100 had been hit in a wing and was losing fuel at an alarming rate, so his leader directed him to Udorn. A man in the radio room called the ambassador while another alerted Udorn operations about the possibility of another SAR. With all available H-34s committed to the Zeitler SAR, CJ Abadie had maintenance roll out a CIC ship from the hangar, and designated Billy Pearson the standby pilot. At 1900 hours, with only 200 pounds of fuel remaining and at 2,500 feet, the Air Force pilot elected to punch out. He survived the ordeal, and in total darkness, Billy P retrieved him south of Nong Khai.

In a memorandum to President Johnson the same day, McGeorge Bundy recapitulated known, but not necessarily all the correct details concerning the incident. Most poignant was that Unger, acting in an emergency, on his own initiative and against explicit Washington orders, authorized American T-28 pilots and napalm to support the SAR.

¹³ Hazen Email, 05/23/16. Joe indicated no napalm was dropped that day, but Wiren insisted he did deliver his canisters. I was not there.

Intelligence sources estimated that the Thai pilots had escaped into the brush and could be in the hands of Meo soldiers. ¹⁴

Perhaps the most important point in the memorandum included the words, "*T-28 operations and attendant contingency rescue planning need **intense** and **immediate** review.*"

Billy Z arrived not long before Pearson landed with the jet pilot. Ben Moore, Charlie Weitz, and others waited on the ramp. Relieved that the long day was over and almost successful, everyone, including Billy himself, was crying.

The Air Commando doctor at the Det-6 facility tended Billy Z's foot wound and burns that covered twenty-five percent of his body. He had also been hit by something in the lower back, but the greasy, hand-me-down flak vest had prevented a missile or fragment penetration, although a sizeable bruising was spreading throughout the area.

Captain Jim Rhyne stood by to fly Zeitler to Bangkok in a Company C-45. However, after treatment and some deliberation, the Air Force physician routed Billy to the U.S. Army hospital at Korat. The reasons were twofold. Honchos did not want to alert the media and public to the action occurring in Laos, or that we "civilians" were being subjected to enemy fire. Additionally, he could also be stabilized at Korat, then, if his injuries warranted, he could be transferred to Clark Air Force Base in Luzon, Philippine Islands.

Bill remained in the hospital for more than three weeks and limped noticeably after discharge. The kidney injury troubled him most of all. Even hospital personnel were concerned, for he passed blood continually in his urine for over a week.

¹⁴ This information proved erroneous, as the men had been captured and later succumbed in enemy prison.

On 9 September, the McCaslands went to the airfield early, hoping to board a plane to Korat, and assist in Billy Z's return to Udorn. They waited all day, but all aircraft were fully loaded. The same day, Rita White and Michie Stevens arrived in Udorn to join their husbands after a short probation period. The next day, they again went to the field early with illusions of catching the first flight to Korat. However, they did not board a New Zealand Bristol until afternoon and reached Korat Air Force Base at 1500 hours. They went to the hospital and visited Zeitler, who was not released until the following day. That night, they RON in a very dirty hotel. With Billy Z and his paramour Molly in tow, they arrived in Udorn on Friday just after lunch.

Wayne Knight was away on business on the day of the downing. When he returned to Udorn, he and Scratch Kanach journeyed to Korat to debrief Bill, who was still bed-ridden, but relatively lucid. They conversed for two hours. Bill divulged that while he lay in the small steam and covered himself with large leaves, he watched armed hostiles moving through the area, probing and searching for him. During the discussion, he casually mentioned that he was glad he did not have a gun, because he probably would have used it, giving his position away, and would not have been able to escape. In praising Jack Connor's heroic display that day, Z-man indicated that his savior, Jack, possessed "balls as large as an elephant." For a long time, Zeitler withheld official details concerning the messier part of his ordeal. The men he savagely terminated apparently wore neither pathet Lao nor aviator coveralls, and he feared that he had possibly killed the Thai pilots by miscalculation. Later, he told Ab the sordid details. When I returned from leave, he confessed to me that he had killed two men with his bare hands.

Meo teams from Site-95, while patrolling the area discovered the two Vietnamese soldiers Billy killed. They retrieved a few of "Pappy" Pascual's remains--so few that they fit in a small box. Ironically, "Pappy" had been dropping grenades in peanut butter jars the day before his death.

The most beneficial healing regime at Korat was the psychiatric help Bill received. During daily sessions, the doctor advised him not to suppress the incident or bury it in his mind. ¹⁵

While his girlfriend Molly continued to attend to all his needs, Bill recovered slowly at home.

The gun issue, first mentioned under sedation while in the hospital, escalated into a potential problem for U.S. pilots, who sought official authorization to carry weapons in the face of an increasingly hostile environment.

Sometime later, while on STO in Taipei, prompted and encouraged by Company personnel, Billy composed an "official" written report regarding his downing and rescue, in which he curiously stated he was glad he did not have a gun with him on the ground that day. He volunteered similar information to George Doole and Hugh Grundy during an interview.

After returning to Udorn, both he and Wayne Knight were summoned to Pat Landry's AB-1 office. The meeting was hostile. Pat asked Bill if he ever made an oral statement that a weapon was carried onboard Hotel-19 on the day of the SAR. Z answered in the affirmative. The number two Agency man in Udorn then inquired if he had indicated that he was glad he did not use it. Again, Bill replied in the affirmative. Pat then made a

¹⁵ Author Note: Attesting to his mental strength, it is significant that Bill claims no post traumatic stress (PTS), or flashbacks of the incident today.

statement that Zeitler interpreted as one that might cause his termination.

Bill answered, *"Do you know who discussed that same issue with me?"*

"Who?"

"The CEO of Air America, who I believe is from the CIA." Then, forgetting that he had briefly discussed this with Wayne and Scratch at Korat, he indicated that he had mentioned guns to no one else. However, he had a good idea of how Pat heard about the gun issue. Apparently, George Doole wrote a report that was shunted through channels back to AB-1. As Wayne was involved, from that time on, Bill also considered him part of the Agency.

Billy tired of his enforced inactivity. During October he visited Abadie to seek a return to flying status. Ab noted that Bill still limped noticeably, and counseled him that he should be patient until fully healed. This was frustrating. Therefore, while sitting in front of the COO's desk, Z decided on a drastic move to get back on the flight schedule. Using the bad foot, he kicked the desk over into Ab's lap. The foot hurt like hell for sometime afterward, but he established his point, and was soon allowed to fly upcountry.

Just as both Captains Tom Moher and Mike Marshall had experienced following their incidents, flying in the mountains was never the same for Bill. He especially had a difficult time obtaining proper rest at Long Tieng. After rising fatigued every morning, he experienced a nauseous feeling until entering the cockpit. However, such was not the case while RONing at other outstations in Military Region One and Military Region Four. Finally, in February 1965, with his problem not improving, he lost confidence in his ability to pilot the UH-34, and decided to leave the helicopter program.

He discussed his problem with management personnel, who elected to allow him to transfer to fixed wing. He relocated to Vientiane in early 1965, and assumed a position as a Caribou First Officer. His heart remained in the H-34, and like the Zeitler of old, he clowned with us over the radio. Although an investor in Coble's Asian American Corporation group, after leaving Udorn, he showed little further interest in the business. He later married Molly and departed Air America for Florida, where he attempted to create a Hollywood-type movie business.

ALPHA PROBLEMS

Despite their good work supporting the Zeitler SAR, trouble regarding mission pay continued between the original Alpha group and Air America management. The pilots sought "X" number of under-the-table dollars for field standby, and cockpit time on the ground waiting to launch. They wanted a certain amount per combat hour, and extra money for expending ordnance. Fred Walker, who waved the flag, accused the Alpha pilots of being unpatriotic regarding payment for services. Joe Hazen countered that *"Air America knew exactly how much the Company received from the Customer when a prop or rotor turned, why shouldn't we?"* Fred had no retort.¹⁶

When news of their demands inevitably reached Udorn, we were not pleased. Where was additional pay for our SAR standbys, or placing our lives in jeopardy during actual missions?

The Alpha pay schedule was eventually resolved with a reasonable agreement for all concerned. However, by that time attrition had accounted for a few original members leaving the program. Nevertheless, there was always an excess of Americans

¹⁶ Joe Hazen Email, 05/25/16.

willing to fill the requirement for T-28 pilots. By early September, Dick Crafts began training in the T-28 B and C models. Al Rich, John Blalock, KD Nolan, and Lyons followed. Later Jim Rhyne and ACPH Marius Burke joined the program.

Since most Marine pilots had flown a minimum of seventy five hours in the T-28 during the Navy training program, I was later asked if I was interested in joining the T-28 program. Except for only casually handling airplane controls during deadhead flights, I had not flown a fixed wing for many years. Moreover, I never enjoyed flying planes as much as helicopters. Although accompanying my Father during infrequent sporting trips, I was never allowed to shoot game or handle a fishing pole. Therefore, although observing a kill, I never acquired a killer mentality. Even as a Marine candidate, imbued with Drill Instructor (DI) "Gunny" Stiegerwald's PPK acronym (paid professional killer), I realized that the term was merely part of his extensive repertoire of humor, not actual realism. In reality, as a "non-combat" helicopter pilot, charged to deliver the means of war, unless as a last resort, I would never be called upon to actually kill another human. Probably weighing on my mind more than any other factor, a superego, developed during early Episcopal and Presbyterian religious training, discouraged me from wanting to bomb and strafe people. The opportunity to at last strike back at our adversaries was tempting, but after consideration, I rejected the offer. Later, several life-threatening incidents gave me pause to reflect that perhaps I should have accepted the opportunity to counter enemy means to conduct war.

With an inventory of eight aircraft, Alphas renewed missions in November. IVS worker Blaine Jensen recalled that Al Rich, Keith Nolan and Dick Crafts were called upon to fly bombing runs when the situation became difficult. After

completion of missions, they buzzed Sam Tong on the way home to inform Americans there of their presence and that success was achieved.

Pilot memorandums from the Operations Department regarding every phase of our operation continued to inundate us. Like the APM's, many were negative in nature. I saved a stack of them from Ben Moore pertaining to dress and haircut codes, motorcycle helmets, weapons, and the like. Some were boldly pinned on the cork bulletin board on the right wall outside the Club porch entrance. In lieu of this, many copies were slipped into our mailboxes for pilot distribution. (Unfortunately, with clutter building up, I discarded many of these during later years.) Lately, one utilizing color codes had been issued with information on transmitting the number of dead and wounded transported each day in Military Region Two when radioing in upcountry flight time to Vientiane. Apparently, those in command did not want any enemy English speakers receiving information pertaining to our losses.

Lately, according to another memorandum, the previously mentioned "Drop Kick" signal entered our radio terminology to replace the standard Mayday signal that any pilot knew announced an aviators' plight. We were puzzled at the attempt to replace the timeless Mayday. It simply did not make sense. We were told that this would tend to confuse the enemy, who would be deceived and not alerted to an impending crash followed by a SAR attempt. The answer sounded pathetically weak, and there remained the unanswered question of whether the USAF would understand and use the same terminology.

There was method in their madness. Unknown to us at the time, "Drop Kick" was employed for two reasons. In addition to being a substitute word for Mayday, it was also a recall code

word alerting Alpha pilots flying upcountry to immediately return to Wattay Airport to participate in a SAR operation.

In the end, "Drop Kick" was used infrequently, if at all, for a pilot distress call. I certainly never used or heard it over the airwaves. Since the term only caused confusion, it was largely discontinued after a beleaguered large bird pilot reputedly radioed "Drop Kick" to a Chinese radio operator. Not understanding the message, the radio operator replied, "*Oh, you dropped your kicker?*" Stranger than fiction, how could anyone create such an anecdote as this? ¹⁷

¹⁷ End of Segment Notes:

Dave Hickler Comments regarding Air America SARs.

Bill Leary 1964 Notes.

Ken Conboy, 112-113.

Dick Elder Taped Interview at Author's House, 08/31/88.

Mike Marshall Written Answer to Author's Questions of 04/29/96.

Mike Marshall Emails, 08/10/99, 08/29/99.

Les Strouse Taped Interview with the Author at Jeff Johnson's House Bangkok, Thailand, 12/24/96.

Bill Zeitler Taped Interview at Author's House, 09/01/01.

Bill Leary's Taped Interview at Zeitler's Florida Home.

Wayne Knight Emails, 07/01/00, 07/02/00, 07/04/00, 09/05/01, 09/06/01.

John Wiren Emails, 02/07/04, 02/08/04.

Joan McCasland September Diary Notes.

Dave Hickler Personal Observations to Hugh Grundy, Air America President Regarding the Loss of Hotel-19, 08/22/64.

Department of Air Force Message, 08/18/64.

Leonard Unger to State, 08/18/64.

Memorandum McGeorge Bundy to the President, 08/18/64.

Blaine Jensen Letter.

Joe Leeker Information Regarding DC-7A Caribous.

For a number of reasons, the Zeitler incident triggered great anxiety in USG circles both at Vientiane and Udorn. Since details of the SAR were certain to leak to the press and to the world, there was concern on the political front revealing Thai pilots' participation in "neutral" Laos. There was also concern within Thai Air Force hierarchy over the assurance of continued rescue attempts, as such action would determine their continued participation in the semi-clandestine Bravo Team program, without which the T-28 factor would have been stripped bare. ¹

Over the next few days, messages flowed between Washington and Vientiane regarding the Zeitler SAR and the unauthorized use of American T-28 pilots. Unger was not recalled, but received heavy flak from his boss Dean Rusk, who claimed to understand the Lao Ambassador's efforts to maximize Zeitler's successful rescue. ² The Secretary chided Unger, saying the use of American pilots flying T-28s, or other American combat roles in Laos, required deliberation by those responsible at the highest levels in Washington. He counseled that flash messages could rapidly convey pertinent information, and Unger should utilize existing SOPs concerning the use of American T-28 pilots. On a conciliatory note, Rusk did solicit recommendations. He also divulged that had Unger used proper channels, this rescue effort would have certainly been approved. He then counseled following

¹ On a positive note, the incident stimulated a future trend to train and equip Meo pilots to fly critical missions in Military Region Two and Military Region One.

² One can only speculate on State's actions had the SAR not been successful.

the chain of command and his instructions regarding using American pilots without proper clearance.³

Ambassador Unger replied that in the future he would be guided by and proceed in accordance with the Secretary of State's instructions regarding SAR escort. He went on to state the obvious: at crucial times the situation simply did not permit message delay. Moreover, on a local level, he believed that local SAR procedures could be improved to allow additional time for decisions.

In a separate message to State and CINCPAC, the ambassador touted coordinated SAR efforts, and commented on the subject of necessary T-28 support:

*"I do not see much prospect of reducing calls on U.S. planes and personnel for SAR operations if we hope to exploit the advantages of our T-28 strike force in the present military situation."*⁴

He indicated that the continuation of extensive air operations necessitated American (Air America) participation in performing SAR operations. SAR capability was considered a paramount factor in pilot morale. Currently, civilian Air America pilots and military personnel were imperative for rescue attempts.

³ At this point, it is impossible for the Author to refrain from commenting. In retrospect, Washington bureaucrats, never noted for rapid decisions, were far removed from our battlefield. Despite the latest electronic communications, time zone considerations might have held up any determination to release the A-team. This is speculation, but had Unger taken the time to go through the motions seeking approval to use both Alphas and napalm, Billy Z might never have been rescued. Despite political considerations, as later evidenced in South Vietnam, civilians attempting to direct a war from thousands of miles away rarely works to good advantage, and final judgment should always reside with representatives in the field.

⁴ Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1969, Volume 28, Laos. #125, 08/20/64, Telegram from the Embassy in Laos to the Department of State.

A case might be made to the local and international public to utilize U.S. military aircraft and crews during Yankee Team pilot rescue attempts, while denying jets for the recovery of Thai-Lao pilots. However, such bias would certainly sour the group of men flying a majority of operations in the Plain of Jars area, where Air America crewmembers daily exposed themselves to great risk.

T-28 strikes were deemed important to ongoing operations. Even if the Moung Soui area was stabilized, there was still a requirement to maintain pressure on enemy operations along Route-7, at Tha Thom, and in the Military Region Three Panhandle. Therefore, maintaining pressure and momentum was believed important, especially during the current Paris negotiations.

Reiterating recent history, Unger stated that USG overt and covert involvement in Laos was considerable, which included publicized civilian and military supply operations. Since the beginning of the year, there had been more than forty reports of small caliber groundfire incidents against transport, passenger, and helicopter aircraft.

The losses of three T-28s, a U.S. jet, and an Air America H-34 in recent days revealed a significant enemy small arms and triple-A capability, and a desire to protect important areas. These guns included vehicle-towed 37mm, 14.5mm machine guns mounted on open top armored cars, and 12.7mm and 7.62 machine guns in all air artillery units. Heavy anti-aircraft concentrations existed around Phou Khout, Xieng Khouang Ville, and Moung Phan. Intelligence also suspected larger 57mm guns were present in some areas. Because of the formidable defenses in these areas, air operations center (AOC) and planners attempted to keep risks to a minimum and consistent with realistic objectives. This was important because the slow T-28s

were severely limited in attack patterns, and straight-line dives toward targets created vulnerability to ground fire.

Pertaining to T-28 losses, one could cite the law of averages catching up after a period of relative luck. Beginning with the 17 May escalation, the RLAf flew 1543 combat sorties, many against heavily defended targets, including several against upgraded Ban Ken Bridge defenses in the Ban Ban Valley and Phou Khout area. Eight Thai-piloted T-28s attempted to drop the bridge with delay fused 500-pound bombs. All failed to detonate, and one pilot was killed during the mission.

By October, the upgraded bridge consisted of continuous steel manufacture half through truss, one hundred sixteen feet in length by eighteen feet wide. Four T-28s were lost to enemy fire and one to weather during 14 and 16 July, 14 and 18 August.

Overall, T-28 pilots proved a decisive factor in recent military operations. They performed operations to destroy enemy positions, interdicted supply lines, provided close support for ground operations, and flew visual and photographic reconnaissance missions. In addition, they supported SAR operations. They accomplished all this in areas where hostile fire was deemed greater than in South Vietnam.

With the subject of ambassadorial responsibility settled, discussion continued on the subject of T-28 usage. Rusk opined that the loss of two T-28s and an H-34, together with serious political and military risks involved in the SAR, raised the question of sustained usage and substantial risk factor of T-28 strikes on the PDJ and surrounding areas. On the other side of the coin, Washington recognized that T-28 assets had contributed to and been a decisive factor in Triangle's success. The strikes seemed to discourage and undermine enemy resolve, while raising RLA morale and determination to fight.

T-28 operations gave Souvanna Phouma a position of strength during the tripartite Paris negotiations. Therefore, recognizing that T-28s could be employed to advantage in ensuing weeks, minimizing usage of U.S. personnel and assets, State encouraged Unger and his Country Team to forward suggestions.

Souvanna Phouma spent most of August attending Paris conferences, while attempting to reconstruct a coalition government and gain international support for talks with leftists. However, USG doubted that any negotiated ceasefire would constitute the means to end communist designs to take over the country. Therefore, the Prime Minister's U.S. advisors encouraged him to propose demands to lengthen discussions.

Souvanna and Souphanouvong continued an intermittent and unproductive dialogue through 21 September. The Red Prince wanted a fourteen nation conference convened. As a precondition, Phouma insisted first on a countrywide ceasefire, and then Pathet Lao withdrawal to positions on the Plain of Jars occupied on 16 May. Naturally, the leftist leader refused, instead proposing that FAL Deuanist deserters be allowed to reenter Kong Le's army. From the RLG standpoint, this was unrealistic, for the Pathet Lao would not permit ICC access to the Plain of Jars, or Kong Le to reclaim Moung Phanh. The French representative pushed hard for Souvanna to accept leftist proposals, but after deciding that the "Red Prince's" demands were unrealistic, he terminated discussions and returned to Vientiane.

The painful learning process associated with early SARs enabled both the U.S. military and Air America participants to improve procedures conducive to the well-being of rescue assets, and contributed to future successful aviator recovery. This continued to evolve during a stressful year, during which we virtually single-handedly participated in the U.S. military's SAR work.

The introduction of a number of military jets into the SAR arena from Thailand on the eighteenth, the ensuing chaos, and the loss of a jet, stimulated the Joint Chiefs of Staff to forward guidance to CINCPAC and PACAF insisting on enhanced Rules of Engagement (ROE). They stipulated that before committing assets to future SARs a credible opportunity to rescue downed personnel must exist. This included knowledge of the location, circumstances of the downing, and the presence of survivors. At any time, a maximum of four RESCAP aircraft were permitted over the target. Should the Lao Ambassador desire to enlarge or substantially change the operation, clearance with Washington was required before the modification could be effected. In embassy-related SARs, on scene command tactical authority would be delegated to the assigned aircraft.

Responding to State's message the next day, Unger introduced a hammer. He indicated that he needed to use all available T-28 assets at his discretion during SARs, and because Air America pilots were more effective in the Theater, requested increased authority to employ these pilots for a reasonable chance of success. He stressed that without assurance of Alpha assistance during critical times when pilots were down, there would be reluctance on the part of aircrews to perform certain missions.

It was apparent that swiftness to act, and appropriate coordination, were crucial factors in rescuing downed pilots, for the chances of rescue sharply diminished after an hour. At present, Air America pilots whole-heartily supported SAR operations. However, without adequate T-28 escort to suppress enemy ground fire, H-34 pilots were subjected to undue risks from enemy guns. Unless Washington approved his request, Unger speculated that helicopter pilots might refuse to accept future SAR missions.

To reinforce his point, the ambassador reminded his readers that during the recent SAR, Air America pilots were persuaded that napalm was the only efficient weapon available to suppress enemy ground fire and effect a rapid rescue. However, substantial jet strikes made it unnecessary for the Alphas to unload the napalm. In this case, the pilots exercised excellent discretion and good judgment. ⁵

In closing, assuring Rusk that he would seek Washington approval when time permitted, Unger repeated his request for discretionary authority to use T-28s, napalm, and Air America pilots when the situation warranted.

Local *Associated Press* (AP) and *United Press International* (UPI) correspondents heard that one T-28 and one helicopter were lost on the 18th, but were seeking official confirmation before filing stories with their international news bureaus. Reports agreed that the helicopter was shot down during a rescue attempt, and the UPI version stated that the aircraft belonged to the Air America company.

By the twentieth, the recent T-28 and H-34 losses were becoming known to the world. Pathet Lao radio claimed to have one Thai T-28 pilot in custody and had the body of another. Neither report was confirmed by embassy sources.

Unger recommended that, in the event of inquiries, State should suggest that Air America management restrict information solely to the admission of an H-34 loss during a SAR effort.

Despite suppressing official government confirmation of the event, juicy information of this ilk was difficult to conceal in a city bursting with international intrigue, reporters starved for news, various political factions with different agendas, and

⁵ This stretched a point, for it is unlikely that Ambassador Unger was not informed, failed to note, or overlooked the fact that John Wiren had dropped his napalm canisters.

spies. Therefore, an article appeared in the *New York Times* on the 27th rehashing old news, revealing new details, and more or less popping the cork on the bottle.

The commentary related in part:

"When the Air America helicopter was shot down, the incident again drew unwelcome publicity to an enterprise that is shadowy and vague...Air America on its face is a commercial airline chartered to the U.S. Government to supply remote outposts; it has long been suspected, however, that Air America was not merely hired by the Government but is, in fact, the United States Government operating under a commercial cover. Formal denials have seldom been persuasive.

The U.S. is trying to avoid the appearance of violating the Geneva Accords; however, the Pathet Lao accuse Air America of supplying arms to Neutralists and have suggested that pilots are employed by the CIA..." ⁶

On Thursday, Unger received the discretionary authority he requested, but only when necessary for success of a SAR operation. Concerned over future T-28 operations and about maintaining absolute control, State recommended merit in review of such operations. Current operations portended greater demand for personnel and equipment to implement SAR work, and an increased Air America capability troubled planners about additional losses. Future downings involved a risk of escalation that might not be desirable or manageable. State solicited Unger's opinion: after weighing all factors, did he believe that a reduction in T-28 targeting operations was warranted?

⁶ Although new details have emerged from the efforts of former Air America helicopter Captain Alan Cates, Air America's status as a USG owned and run entity continues to be largely denied today.

State understood that the Air Operations Center (AOC), under guidance of five temporary Assistant Air Attaches, closely controlled Thai and American T-28 missions. However, there was some concern, for equal control did not extend to General Ma's T-28 pilots. Accordingly, Unger's comments and recommendations were requested regarding future T-28 operations and positive control measures.

In a separate message to State, Ambassador Unger discussed the Air America transfer to Seaboard World Services. When he met Souvanna Phouma that morning, he explained his inaction regarding the switch. Mainly he had delayed the process to avoid weakening the essential and comprehensive Operation Triangle airlift and other recent military operations. Furthermore, because of a tentative Lao situation, that he had recently implemented a sixty-day suspension in any action or transfer. The Prime Minister concurred, indicating that if the Paris discussions resulted in some reconciliation, and promised a return to tripartite government, then the transfer would take place. If not, there was absolutely no reason to proceed with the concept. Therefore, they agreed to reconsider the subject before the October deadline, when political and military options were more apparent.

Apprised of the meeting, on 9 October, General Manager Dave Hickler forwarded a message to President Hugh Grundy stating that Air America's presence in Laos and Vientiane no longer appeared to be a burning political issue for the RLG. Furthermore, Souvanna Phouma was no longer concerned if Air America remained in place or was assimilated by Seaboard World Services. Hickler went on to speculate that the ambassador would make the final decision as to the disposition of Air America, and this was TBA (to be announced). Agency Chief of Station

(COS) Blaufarb could see no positive gain in a name change, and Hickler waged a verbal campaign lobbying for the status quo.

In the end, Air America remained USG's conduit to implement policy for the remainder of the Lao war.

Expanded T-28 action was considered for portions of eastern Military Region Three controlled by enemy forces. On the day Bill Zeitler was downed, Ambassador Unger attended a high level meeting at the Udorn airport with U.S. officials from Saigon, MACV, and Bangkok to discuss and form a plan for action in the Panhandle. Attendees considered that possible intelligence gathered from Kha operations in the southern portion of MR-3 would be useful for Vietnamese operational units staged along the Lao-Vietnam border. CAS could develop this capability with minimum effort. Unger agreed that twenty kilometer penetrations into lightly populated areas in Laos were acceptable within the scope of his advisors' plans. For political reasons, he was not as enthusiastic as others concerning tentative plans for the RLAF to strike twenty to forty lucrative targets south of Mugia Pass while new tripartite talks were underway. Moreover, he was worried about the implications should North Vietnamese leaders order reprisal military action in other parts of Laos.

Two days later, after examining a list of MACV, Government of Vietnam, and CAS generated targets, General Ma, who earlier in the month had proposed striking bridges, supply depots, and other targets, now displayed enthusiasm to attack them with his T-28s. However, planners believed that some targets were too heavily fortified, or beyond the capability of Lao pilots, but calculated that supporting Yankee Team assets could take up the slack.

Toward month's end, a three-prong strategy for operations in the Lao Panhandle emerged from Saigon leaders that reiterated employing RLAF T-28 air attacks supplemented by U.S. armed

reconnaissance, air support of ground operations by Vietnamese and Farmgate aircraft, and VNAF and RLAF attacks on targets of opportunity and illegal DVR sites in Laos. Targets developed from air and ground intelligence included: Moung Phine army barracks, Ben Thay military camp, Ban Na Nhom military camp, Tchepone army barracks, Huong Nong military area, Ban Trim barracks, and other supply areas. However, General Westmoreland, believing the RLAF incapable of such interdiction, or that political consideration would warrant the attacks, opted for VNAF/Farmgate assets.

The SAR quagmire bogged down when CINCPAC addressed the current problem of utilizing Thailand-based air assets during Lao SAR missions when pilots were forced down in communist territory. It was noted that on two recent occasions, Ambassador Unger had requested and received U.S. fighter CAP because in-country resources were not deemed realistic for the expected opposition. Current procedures required lengthy processing through a number of command echelons causing undue delay in receiving the assets.

Therefore, CINCPAC recommended that the on scene tactical commander be allowed to respond to requests for SAR support directly from the ambassador without first obtaining authority from Washington. In other words, the **man** in the field could finally generate a decision based on personal observation of present conditions. ⁷

The message continued to justify logical military thinking by citing the obvious: chances for successful aviator rescues were greatly enhanced if the SAR attempt was conducted before

⁷ Author Note: It is unfathomable to the Author how such a relatively simple issue was previously overlooked. It smacked of bureaucratic red tape, unnecessarily long convoluted chains of command, and protected job status (CYA) that initially existed in accomplishing life-saving missions.

the enemy had ample time to react and the pilot was still in good physical condition. When fighter-bomber support was required, surprise, speed, and force of the attack would present a greater effect on organized opposition. Therefore, the earlier support was provided, the greater the chance a helicopter rescue could be accomplished with a minimum risk to friendly participants. Additionally, any failure to provide U.S. jet CAP when a Lao or Thai pilot was downed would impart a very poor impression to allied forces.

State, Defense, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, believing CINCPAC's recommendations solid and appropriate, agreed with the points made in the message.

As SAR requirements increased, standard operating procedures (SOP) constantly evolved and were frequently augmented. This somewhat benefited those of us in the field, especially in later months when urgent demands for SARs took us deeper into enemy-controlled territory.

RESCAP aircraft operation orders were clearly spelled out, but as situations varied, were not always realistic. U.S. jets were not allowed into a downed area unless requested by the on-scene rescue commander or the rescue control ship (Crown). Should SAR helicopters receive ground fire while entering the area, RESCAP would suppress the fire after the helicopters departed. If hostile fire emanated from the immediate vicinity of the downed crewmember, air support would ensure that return fire not endanger friendly personnel. If a crew on the ground was positively observed, and groundfire prevented helicopters from hovering for the extraction, jets would position between the enemy and survivor to create a screening action for the rescue ships. Now, at least, the fast movers possessed firm guidelines with which to operate. However, there was still a great deal of work to do in respect to our position in the SAR

formula. From a slow moving H-34 pilot's perspective, we were never briefed on SOPs, and never worked with the jets unless in a SAR situation. Therefore, we normally had to rely on Company assets, experience, guts, and a great deal of luck to accomplish the missions. Of course, we always attempted to do what was required, and did not confuse the issue with intangibles.

Discussion concerning SAR mission policy continued at the highest State levels on Wednesday. Secretary Rusk recognized that T-28 operations, in addition to SAR escort, were vital for their military and psychological effects. He reiterated the importance of using Air America pilots on SARs. In an unnecessary statement to Ambassador Unger pertaining to our work, he asserted that the pilots could perform a critically important role by not discriminating on whom they rescued.⁸

Repetitive statements granted Unger discretionary authority to employ Air America helicopter crews and planes whenever the situation justified, but he was cautioned to always obtain Washington approval, when and if time permitted. However, Rusk cautioned that SAR operations involved a chance of escalation in methods that might not be acceptable in the Southeast Asian picture.

Unfortunately, we were not privy to Washington-Vientiane Embassy dialogue, or the constraints Unger labored under. If so, we might have been more understanding of his position. All the new regulations and stipulations tended to slow SAR launches when time was **the** critical factor in a rescue attempt. Unger, always opposed to unrestricted bombing, must have been very confused at times, as to what was and was not permissible to

⁸ Author Note: Apparently, as a rear echelon principal, Secretary Rusk was not aware that from the beginning of our operations in Laos we never discriminated as to the ethnic origin of the man on the ground.

remain out of trouble with his Washington State Department superiors, and still accomplish a mission. Of course, every second delay during a launch process measurably increased crew and downed pilot risk. This was particularly the case when an aviator was down in hostile territory. For us pilots, future SAR missions appeared no better conducted than previous ones. When word arrived at Long Tieng, and the ambassador was not available to make a decision, we used to joke with Tony and among ourselves that of course he was not available--he was hiding under his bed. It was a particularly dismal period for those of us in the field, and equally so for survivors on the ground, who had little knowledge of where they were or of who might attempt to rescue them. ⁹

⁹ Segment Sources:

Blaine Jensen Letter, 07/01/96.
 Dean Rusk to Leonard Unger, 08/19/64 (2).
 Joe Leeker, *Air America in Combat*, 26, fn 128.
 Leonard Unger to State, 08/19/64 (2).
 Joint Chiefs of Staff on Search and Rescue, 08/19/64.
 Leonard Unger to State, 08/20/64.
 State to Unger, 08/20/64.
 Jacob Van Staaveren-*Interdiction*, 36.
 Telegram U.S. Embassy Vietnam, Maxwell D, Taylor, Ambassador to Vietnam to State, 08/20/64.
 SAR in Laos, Assistant Secretary of Defense (McNaughton), 08/26/64.
CHECO.
 Rusk to Unger on the Importance of Air America Missions, 08/26/64.
 Memorandum General Westmoreland to Ambassador Taylor, 08/28/64.
 Memorandum Prepared by State for the White House Concerning the Lao Situation, 09/18/64.
 Professor William Leary, *A Bit of History: SAR-January 13 and 14, 1965, Air America Log*.
 Bill Leary 1964 Notes, UTD.
 Dave Hickler Memorandum to President Grundy, 10/09/64.
 DIA Assessment of the Ban Ken Bridge, 10/09/64.

DRUGS

Toward the end of August, unsavory allegations from a source of "unknown reliability" accused Air America C-123 and Caribou crews of loading opium at Ban Houei Sai, Moung Sing, and Luang Prabang. Pilots Dick and Dutch then delivered these drugs to Saigon, dropped them into the Gulf of Siam, or dropped them along the Thai-Burmese border.

USG representatives in Laos were well aware of the ongoing narcotics problems in upper Military Region One, and some directly participated in curbing the traffic by riding on U.S. planes. Refuting the ridiculous charges, a confidential Company memorandum countered that Air America employed no pilots named Dick or Dutch flying C-123s or Caribous. Bird Air did in fact have pilots so named, but the company did not own or fly the aircraft in question. Operating from Moung Sing was impossible, as it had been in enemy hands since the fall of Nam Tha during early 1962. Ninety percent of C-123 flights consisted of airdrops, which returned to Udorn or Vientiane without ever landing. During August, six C-123s landed at Luang Prabang, but none at Ban Houei Sai (pilots: Art Nugent, Andy Anderson; Jim Voyles, Rick Byrne; Tom Crews, Duprie). Caribous, in lieu of airdrops, landed most of the time. Three Ban Houei Sai landings were recorded in August, none at Luang Prabang (pilots: Ed Eckholdt, Quackenbush). Air America C-47 crews landed at the royal capitol fourteen times during the month. Helio Courier pilots landed at Ban Houei Sai three times after direct flights from Vientiane. Other Helio Couriers operating upcountry, and possibly Customer directed to Military Region One from Sam Tong or Long Tieng, were not logged. A twin Beech Ten Two landed once at Ban Houei Sai.

Although probably not completely resolved, I am sure the matter was further investigated and Air America was not implicated in any drug trafficking. ¹⁰

¹⁰ Air America Archives University of Texas, August 1964 Confidential Memorandum Relating to Allegations Air America was Participating in Drug Trafficking.

During August, a fresh shipment of H-34s slated for the Air America Udorn helicopter inventory arrived at Klong Toey on a gray U.S. Navy USMTS vessel. Because Thai military leaders wanted the machines, amid wrangling they were not released for three weeks. They were possibly held hostage until the Thai government and military leaders were assured of USG Hawk missile delivery or other similar perquisites.

At the time of release, Wayne Knight and a maintenance team left Udorn to supervise and help prepare the machines for flight. He discovered the aircraft heavily cocooned with an anti-corrosion, white rubberized material covering all exterior metal surfaces, the blades removed, and the engines preserved. The team had fun initially peeling the rubber off, but after a few minutes their knuckles bled profusely. Examination revealed that the rubber on the deck-bound ships had become impregnated with sharp salt particles during the long trip across the Pacific Ocean.

Wayne discovered from a crewmember that the ship contained other valuable cargo below deck. It was chock-a-block with cases of beer. The enlisted crew enjoyed nightly sessions depleting the stock during the trip. The Skipper and other authorities overlooked the long-standing Navy tradition of no drinking aboard ship, and losses were anticipated.

The aircraft were basically flyable. By the 21st, the first machine was assembled and ready for run-up. Consequently, the CPH began testing vibration levels and checking for any other problems. Convinced of its airworthiness to ferry, he flew the first H-34 to Don Muang International Airport. Over a four day period, he delivered Hotels-25, 26, and 24 to the Air America

facility. Hotel-23 required additional work, which was accomplished by another individual. They were fueled and eventually ferried to Udorn, where maintenance performed more detailed inspections. This satisfied the Deputy Chief contractual requirement for insurance specifications before release to upcountry use. ¹

“SANDY”

On Monday, the same day Wayne ferried Hotel-24 from Klong Toei to Don Muang, Helio Courier pilot, Albert “Sandy” Sandoval was killed at Pakse. While departing the macadam airstrip in a Helio Courier, eyewitnesses observed B-849 pitching straight up, stalling, and crashing. “Sandy” had sustained a serious head injury earlier in the year. Following industry standards, the Company had grounded him for six-months. Following the well-liked pilot’s demise, there was speculation that lingering effects of his earlier injury had rendered him unconscious during the critical takeoff phase.

THE INIMITABLE PORTER HOUGH

With the recent influx of H-34s, Washington continued funneling new pilots through the Stateside-Southeast Asia pipeline to Udorn. Most men were considered competent and experienced H-34 pilots culled from various services. The exception was Porter Hough (DOH 08/10/64). Porter, an older individual (DOB 12/13/19) looking much like ancient mummy dust, came from the Fort Rucker, Alabama, Army training base, where, as a contract civilian, he had instructed pilot candidates in the 47G model Bell. Although having logged an impressive 10,000 hours flight time, mostly in a training billet, he had little if

¹ EW Knight Email, 03/26/01.

any H-34 time, and virtually no practical experience in "working a helicopter," or mountain flying.

A CIC-5 test flight on 28 August doubled as Hough's acceptance ride. At the time, Wayne noted that the man was a very weak H-34 candidate, and he had serious doubts about Porter ever upgrading to a Captain status. As it turned out, the CPH could have saved us all a lot of time and effort had he bilged the man out of the program at that time. However, helicopter pilots, especially those with increasingly specialized throttle twisting experience, were scarce commodities. Furthermore, Taipei's reluctance to terminate a man once he reached Southeast Asia was common knowledge. Therefore, local management handled new hires carefully.

The craggy faced Porter was personable, a real character, and as the new Clown Prince, soon became the brunt of many bar jokes. It was easy to feel sorry for the man, but incredibly, he seemed to enjoy the notoriety. Part of his problem was that he talked far too much and claimed excessive knowledge concerning many subjects. He repeatedly related a story about a Hessian mercenary, a purported ancestor, who fought with British forces during the American War for Independence. Like so many others of that ilk, after hostilities the man adopted and remained in the fledgling country. All Porter's stories were entertaining, and I am sure that those who had the opportunity to fly with him heard them all. He reminded me of the proverbial class clown present in all gatherings, who spouted Bravo Sierra to gain acceptance.

I only flew with Porter upcountry once during a day flight in October. Considering all his deficiencies, I do not believe he initially flew with line Captains, but mostly with management pilots until getting a "better feel" for the aircraft. Those line pilots he later crewed with were pre-warned about him, and most returned from upcountry with unflattering reports regarding

their charge's ability. Therefore, most individuals delegated him to the left seat and rarely let him fly. ²

Porter seemed completely happy assuming a sedentary role. He contentedly puffed on his pipe, an unusual habit for a helicopter pilot, who normally had his hands full with cockpit duties. A few pilots enjoyed having him along because of his funny stories that tended to relieve boredom during long flights to outlying stations. However, some of the items he mentioned bordered on weird, such as, how much the paint weighed on the helicopter. He claimed that he had acquired so much knowledge because he "had journeyed over to the other side." Although probably second on the know-it-all list, Herb Baker, our on-again off-again pilot, could not hold a candle to Porter.

By the time we flew together, Porter's oddball reputation was well established among us line pilots. One "idiotsyncrasy" displayed during the familiarization phase of his training was to open and spread a map all over the cockpit, rather than fold it into smaller sections as most other First Officers did. As new pilots entered our program, unless I felt one hundred percent comfortable with their performance, it was my policy--and that of many peers--to place the First Officer in the left seat to either fly from that position, or merely observe and perhaps learn from my techniques. The left seat designation was an easy decision to make with Porter.

With his many other vocal talents, he professed and seemed to have a good grasp of rudimentary geology. While traversing parallel east-west ridges inside southern mountain areas in

² It is unusual that our flight time records failed to record us flying with Hough. It was as if the man never existed. Normally K.K. Wang's clerks in Taipei listed a Flight Mechanic and second pilot in the Other Crew Members column of the monthly crewmember flight report. In Porter's case, except for his initial flight with Wayne, it appears that he was largely ignored.

Military Region Two that stopped just short of the Vientiane plain, he confidently pointed out what he believed to be natural oil traps. Impressed, I offered the little I heard about Lao natural resources, mainly that French geologists had surveyed parts of the country, but the information had been classified and never divulged to the world. We all knew there were precious minerals present in small quantities, but usually only in enemy-controlled areas in the Attopeu and Khang Khay regions.

Mike Marshall was one pilot who always allowed a new pilot to fly from the right seat, even old Porter, with whom he flew several times. However, he had reservations about the man's ability to perform in the H-34. After overshooting a landing zone, Hough attempted to back up and nearly crashed in the process. Still, Mike encouraged management to provide him more flight time.

Porter's performance failed to improve measurably over a considerable period. Marius Burke, who began assisting Wayne with his duties in September when Scratch opted to return to more lucrative line work, spent considerable time training and retraining Hough. However, there was no syllabus available for fundamental training in the H-34. New hires were **expected** to have a basic level of skill in the machine, so it was easy to predict that Porter would never cut the mustard.

One day Burke was demonstrating hoist operations on the grass median between the runway and taxiway, with Porter observing from the cabin section. While Marius hovered, Porter thought of a question to ask. Instead of simply using the intercom system, he reached up to the cockpit deck through Marius's legs, grabbed and shook the cyclic to obtain his attention. The dangerous move definitely attracted Burke's attention, and stimulated considerable ire.

Hough's problems were not only restricted to flying the H-34. He was also plagued with hemorrhoid problems. One day at Luang Prabang, a number of helicopters were assigned to ferry RLA troops to forward positions. As the CPH walked back to his aircraft following the Customer briefing, he peered in the cabin of a ship and was shocked to observe Porter, pants lowered, inserting a suppository into his anal cavity.

Porter's inability to perform to procedural standards worried everyone in our group. The problem became a conundrum. Assuming a miracle and his eventual upgrading to Captain, no one wanted "a weak sister" in the group, especially since in a critical time of need, we needed to rely on competent pilots to "go the extra mile" and pluck us from the weeds. Over time, because it was obvious that the man would never upgrade to Captain, and we had no provision for permanent First Officers, spokesperson Charlie Weitz, never at a loss for words, lobbied to have him sent elsewhere.

Finally, Marius realistically admitted to himself and Wayne that he was wasting valuable time and effort with Porter, and ceased trying to train his protégé. Consequently, the CPH forwarded a message to the head shed stating that after extensive training efforts, Porter Hough was unable to measure up to Captain requirements and should be terminated. Predictably, Taipei headquarters initially balked at the option and ordered minimum additional flight time followed by another evaluation. This was accomplished with little improvement, so Captain Abadie, who flew very little, and almost never upcountry since returning from his year in Taipei, agreed to conduct a check ride with Hough. The effort would either upgrade the man or forever settle the issue. As management pilots amply employed during check rides in past years, a simple flight to Vientiane and return was scheduled. Taking advantage of the rare

opportunity to sit in the right seat, Porter managed the start, taxi, and takeoff procedures without an apparent problem. Although Abadie probably conspired with others in the management team to use the "check ride" as subterfuge to rid the helicopter program of the unwanted man, miracles could always occur, and there was a slim possibility that Porter might have passed the check ride. However, after leveling off at cruise altitude, setting a proper course for Wattay Airport, and trimming the aircraft, he locked the collective down, removed his hands and feet from the controls and relied on the ASE to fly the helicopter. Then he inexplicably fired up his favorite pipe, folded his hands and arms across his chest, and after dipping his head to his chest, contentedly began puffing. This procedure might have been acceptable had he been flying in a solo status, but as a former instructor, he should have been aware that this was exactly the wrong course of action for anyone to assume during a check ride. The First Officer's casual attitude was too much for Abadie, who now considered himself a brick and mortar person, and really disliked anything connected with cockpit work. He was livid, and immediately terminated the flight. Porter's career as a potential H-34 pilot was finished.³

Finally, while every helicopter pilot breathed a sigh of relief, Udorn management released Hough. However, before completing the checkout process in Taipei, he was curiously redirected to Vientiane, where he became a permanent First Officer in the Caribou program. Porter led the way. No helicopter pilot had ever transferred directly to the big bird,

³ CJ Abadie Email, 01/27/99. *"When I returned to Udorn there had been several changes in the operation and I just tried to fit in. I thought it was running OK and I had a lot of catching up to do. I did not fly on the Special Missions because of my clearance and company management did not want me to fly at all after I returned. However, I did manage to keep a hand in test flights and some upcountry trips."*

old boy fixed wing club. The move set a precedent, paving the way for Bill Zeitler to later transfer to the Caribou program in February 1965. However, subsequent requests for transfer to fixed wing by Captains Art White, Lou McCasland, and others were denied.

Although they probably required a warm body in the right seat to satisfy Company regulations, one can surmise that Captain Fred Walker and his subordinates were not overjoyed to have such a deficient pilot as Porter in their program. Still, since the deed was sanctioned by higher ups, he was eased into a well-paying niche that lacked any responsibility, and he was wholly content in this billet. Despite never handling aircraft controls, I am sure that he continued entertaining PIC's with his faux knowledge and stories. Before long, aspects of his transition to the Caribou were either personally observed by deadheading helicopter pilots, or information casually leaked to us during conversations with Vientiane employees. To minimize cockpit problems, like a physician challenged by the medical communities' Hippocratic Oath "to do no wrong," Porter's Captains established a standard daily routine for him to employ in the cockpit. Upon entering his airborne office, the Captain greeted Porter then after conducting takeoff checklists, told him to "assume the position." This process entailed placing his hands securely under his posterior during takeoff and climb out. Initially, until proving his worth, he was not even allowed to touch the logbook. Over time no instructions had to be issued, and Porter "assumed the position" out of habit.

Porter remained with Air America for many years, and bragged proudly about being **the** senior First Officer in the

Company. Of course, he never changed, and many colorful stories concerning his antics flowed out of Vientiane. ⁴

⁴ Wayne Knight Emails, 07/04/00 (2), 03/31/01, 01/25/07, 01/26/07.

EW Knight August Monthly Flight Report.

Mike Marshall Emails, 9/11/99, 9/18/99.

Marius Burke Email, 07/11/99.

Charles Klusmann successfully escaped his communist jailers toward the end of August. The event marked the first of only two captured U.S. military airmen who escaped enemy incarceration and were recovered during the entire Lao war.

After forming a bond of trust with Boun Mi and two other friendly inmates, Deng and Pad, the small group went forward with escape planning. They determined that the fences masked by the building opposite the guard shack would have to be breached. At appropriate times, while outside the far end of the building, they carefully wiggled selected post nails holding barbed wire, until the holes were enlarged so the nails could easily be removed. Eventually, the wire was loose enough to push out, raise, and crawl under.

Because of less accessibility, the outer fence was a little more trouble. However, unlike Chuck, the Lao were allowed out of the compound almost daily to work around the area. They had an opportunity to purchase items like bananas, which they readily shared with Klusmann. Most of the corn had already been harvested, so one person in the work detail returned with corn stalks and showed Klusmann how to eat them. Since the outer layer sliced the corners of one's mouth, he peeled this off to expose the soft inner portion. This was almost as sweet as sugar cane and easily swallowed.

Once a week, he was allowed out of the compound with the other inmates to bathe in the stream and wash his soiled clothes. During these all-hands wash days, after gaining expertise loosening nails on the inner fence, they managed to achieve the same results while hanging clothes to dry on the outer wire. After all was done, they had to determine an optimum

time to leave. Because of a dry spell and early moonrise, they agreed to wait until the first week in September, or until the best possible conditions presented themselves.

By 20 August, Klusmann began feeling well again. Not long afterward, torrential rains inundated the area. Word of their escape plans may have leaked, for guards busily cut high grass around the building out to a twenty yard perimeter. Therefore, suspicious of the possibility of an in-house informer who might destroy all hopes of any future escape, they decided to leave ASAP. All the factors believed necessary to cover the escape--rain and a late moonrise--were falling into place.

By then, the group had grown to six, all of whom agreed to breakout on the 27th. To sustain them until reaching northern friendly lines, they pooled rice, peppers, and salt in sections of parachute cloth. That night, while preparing to leave, one person in the group indicated something had gone wrong. It had. After venturing outside, they observed the compound was surrounded by five guards, where normally one sat in a lean-to by the gate. Suspecting a tip by an inside informant, they decided to abort the attempt, and not decide another escape until the very last minute.

The following day rain fell in earnest toward late afternoon. Five guards materialized early, but, discouraged by the driving rain and inactivity in the prison, all but one soon disappeared. The time was ripe to go.

Klusmann had been allowed to keep his flight suit and boots after capture. In addition, he was provided other clothes and tennis shoes. Anticipating escape, he wore only the flight suit and tennies for a week. That night he bent strips of bamboo, obtained from day workers, into half hoops and placed them underneath his blanket to simulate a human shape. Then he removed the flight suit and shoes and hung them at the foot of

the bed. Satisfied the bed looked occupied in the dim light, he donned the Pathet Lao clothing and his flight boots.

One of the POWs engaged the guard in conversation, while Klus and Boun Mi exited the building and went to the pre-rigged fence. They quickly removed the nails, pushed out the wires, and crawled under the first and then the outer fence. Throughout the process, Chuck was apprehensive that they would be shot immediately after clearing the last fence, but nothing happened. Soon joined by Deng and Pad, they moved around the tank park and dashed twenty yards into high grass near the stream. One man, anxious about his two friends, Kham Chen and Khun Mi, indicated he would wait for them, and join the others later at a pre-arranged meadow. The three remaining escapees crossed the stream and took off at high port in the dark across a wide-open field toward woods. The pelting rain and movement of water buffalo provided sufficient noise to cover their splashing and panting. Upon entering the tree line, they encountered a well-used trail, which they followed until hearing noises that sounded like loud vehicle traffic. Expecting the worst, they immediately dove into bushes until several old Model T Ford buffalos tromped by without bell and clapper.

The trail led to the specified meadow where the men waited impatiently for the second group. After what seemed like a half-hour or more, they began wondering if something had gone wrong with the other three's escape, particularly since one of the men knew the area and had done most of the escape planning. ¹

Klus knew they had to achieve the maximum distance from the camp that night before being discovered missing. He also pointed

¹ At the last minute, Kham Chen and Khun Mi elected not to attempt escape. Enemy patrols captured Deng, and he was later executed.

out that patrols would certainly be looking for them by morning. Boun and the other man stubbornly wanted to wait for their cellmates, but Chuck nervously indicated he would go on alone. It was purely a bluff. Except for moving northwest, he had no idea where to go. When formulating the escape plan, Boun Mi had mentioned a friendly village located a good distance north of Vang Vieng. He did not know its name nor had he ever been there, but professed to generally know the way. Finally, after more discussion, all agreed to continue the march along established trails. While traveling over the crest of a row of hills, and later into a narrow valley, they passed scattered, darkened farmhouses, but all was quiet except for their pounding hearts.

During the false light of pre-dawn, while walking carefully along rice paddy berms, Klusmann observed a farmer tilling his plants. As he had grown a full beard during the weeks of captivity, thereby looking different from a clean-skinned Lao, Chuck worried that he might be recognized as a farang. Therefore, he lowered his head, hunched over, and pulled his sweater over his chin. The old boy, either not actually seeing the trio in the dim light, or preferring to ignore them, continued working. Just as the sun was rising, they encountered and successfully dashed across Route-71, the last major east-west road before ravines and foothills leading to the sanctuary of towering mountains.

Again, they remained on trails to ensure hasty movement. Before long, they were in foothills. About 0930 hours, while proceeding down a slope, they encountered a small valley. As they rested behind boulders at the valley's entrance, Pad observed a farmhouse beyond rice paddies on the far side of the valley. In Lao Buddhist society, it was common practice for a hungry traveler to seek food from strangers, so he elected to chance begging food and water.

Immediately after Pad departed, Klusmann began having reservations and an intuitive bad feeling. He and Boun Mi could not see well from behind the boulders, so they opted to move upslope a hundred feet above the valley floor for improved observation. Pad was toting a canteen, which Chuck thought might be the wrong item to be carrying in this situation. He believed that in the hours since their escape, word of their escape was certain to have already been disseminated throughout the region. From the time of his capture in June, he had traveled many miles through enemy territory, and was highly impressed that every place he walked, black communication wires lined the trails. Furthermore, each camp, no matter how insignificant or remote, possessed functional Soviet field phones.

Pad was invited into the farmhouse. A few minutes later, three men crossed the rice fields toward the house. At the same time, Boun and Chuck, hearing the noises nervously jumped behind bushes, while two soldiers passed close enough to touch. It was fortunate that they were not seen, for had they been discovered the desperate men were resolved to resist.

Apparently, the farmhouse was a troop billet, for soon afterward a soldier led the shackled man out the door at rifle point. ² The troops who passed talked with the farmhouse group, then reversed direction and began moving toward Klus and Boun Mi. With their lives in jeopardy, they scampered over the ridgeline and raced down the far side. Both men simultaneously vaulted over bushes covering a low fence. They landed upright in a wet rice paddy, temporarily becoming mired in mud. While attempting to drag their feet from the muck, rifle fire was heard. They left the paddy and wove through bushes. Boun was

² Klusmann later heard that to set an example, captured escapees were shot. Pad was no exception.

moving like a charging elephant, so Chuck grabbed the youngster and, hoping to set the example, said to follow him. He wanted Boun to gently separate the bushes and grass, not disturb the foliage and generate an obvious trail. After a time, Boun gained some idea of what Chuck had learned in his escape and evasion classes. The rifle shots and yelling continued. Chuck believed these were only signaling methods rather than their actual sighting.

They encountered a large slash and burn clearing, bisected by a trail. The two briefly debated going around, but with the enemy still in hot pursuit, ended running directly across the open space. Halfway through the clearing Klus kicked up a covey of quail that fluttered noisily into the air. For the better part of three hours the escapees doubled back on their course until, hearing no more shouts or shots, were confident they had lost their pursuers.

After the loss of their friend and the difficult work evading, they decided not to approach people unless absolutely certain they were friendly. Using this philosophy, they continued on the original course they believed would lead them to safety. The journey took them toward harsh mountains and the most difficult part of the trip. Following a stream, they came upon a small village in a narrow valley. Not wanting to interact with villagers, they hiked up-stream, crossed to the other side, and climbed a steep mountain. The gullies contained dense tropical vegetation, but hillsides were dotted with pine forests that were easier to negotiate.

Over the next two days, they attempted to move in a northerly direction by noting the sun's position. Should clouds later intervene to mask visibility, the day's travel was planned in the morning, and they selected prominent distant checkpoints for orientation. This was more difficult during rainy conditions

that limited visibility. However, thundering artillery booms from the south kept them generally oriented.

Instead of creating new paths through challenging grass and bush, when possible, they utilized animal trails to move more rapidly. This had a down side as leeches proliferated on the low foliage, and they had to stop every few hours to remove the engorged pests. Klus had laced his boots tight, so the leeches did not manage to slither inside, but merely attacked him from the top of the boot upward to his shins and knees. New ones always managed to return to the same sites as those removed. He even found one perilously close to his scrotum. After the ordeal he believed that he had lost considerable blood.

When trails were not available through the head high grass and tropical growth, they took turns breaking a trail. When one man tired after stomping for about a hundred yards, the other one took over. Cooperation was excellent and neither man complained.

Boun Mi was a very helpful partner, knowing which berries, melons, and the internal core of banana trees to consume. Although Klusmann was not terribly hungry, abandoned farms provided nutritious bamboo shoots, corn stalks, and sweet potatoes. With numerous streams available and continuous rain falling, there was abundant water to drink. The water was made more palatable by a small hard berry Boun provided to chew.

At dark, with rain pelting them, it became impossible to see, so they stopped inside a bamboo grove. Believing no one would search for them in such weather, they huddled together and built a small fire of twigs to warm their hands and ward off the cold air.

By first light, they again moved laboriously toward their projected objective. They crossed a stream and then a river, where they found a tree containing a fruit similar to wild figs

that tasted like strawberries. Once again, Boun Mi's knowledge and advice was invaluable to Klus in maintaining a semblance of health, for in survival school he was advised never to eat anything with a milky sap, something both figs and papaya contained.

Boun pointed to a huge mountain in the distance, and indicated the far side contained friendly troops. Thus invigorated, crossing small ridges, they steadily moved toward the mountain. Toward evening, after discovering a hillside shack, they built a fire and cooked squash gathered from a farmer's field. Attempting to dry their wet clothing, Chuck removed his boots that had filled with water and mud while transiting the rivers. He had numerous blisters on his sore feet. He was happy to have the military boots, but they afforded problems that limited his progress on muddy hill trails. Specifically, the smooth soles accumulated thick layers of mud and caused him to slip, as if walking on ice.

Before leaving the hut, they ate what remained of the cooked squash and saved a melon for later consumption. Then, after smearing mud on the leech lesions to stem blood loss and swelling, they moved out. With leech bites and blisters bothering him, Chuck had limited mobility in his right leg, especially while moving through the heavy saw grass that tore both his clothes and skin.

By early afternoon, they observed three fortified hilltops containing huts and earthworks an estimated mile in the distance. Boun was certain that they housed friendly government positions, but after what had happened to their fellow escapee, Klusmann was unconvinced. They continued to laboriously slog toward the positions. While crossing the hills, Klus observed a small plane rise from a distant hilltop. Thinking he could signal the aircraft, he asked Boun for the small piece of mirror

he carried in his bug-out pouch at the time of their escape. However, during their movement over the harsh terrain, Boun had misplaced it.

Late in the day, while cautiously working their way around trails below a ridgeline that plunged into a deep ravine, they heard men talking. In more than three days, the two men had covered at least fifteen miles from the enemy-controlled flatlands. Not certain they were still being pursued, they speculated that if these people were friendly, why were they so far out in front of their main positions. At the time, it never dawned on them that the men might be searching for them.

A forward listening post lay at the end of the ridge. While the "round-eye" elected to remain in the tall grass, Boun Mi volunteered to approach the hut. He found the structure empty, but containing equipment common to government forces. They moved on to a second shack, which Boun approached while the American again remained hidden. This time, two armed soldiers came out to greet him. Boun, a lowland ethnic from an area of many diverse tribes, understood and spoke ample Meo to converse with the men. Within a few minutes he waved to his companion that all was well. The man in charge hastily wrote a note containing Klusmann's name, rank, and serial number, and then sent a runner to Bouam Long, where a radio operator could forward a message to Long Tieng. Then they moved down to an outpost, where they rested and an officer offered to convey them to the village. Since it was located downhill and Chuck was having trouble walking, troops fashioned a walking stick for his use.

They were afforded a warm welcome at the village of Bouam Long. The local medic conscientiously treated superficial cuts and scratches with tincture of Merthiolate. Then women served hot tea, rice, canned meat, and delicious bread, the first

Klusmann had eaten since departing the carrier. They were then encouraged to rest.

There had been some relatively insignificant Meo involvement in the successful escape. Unknown to Klus and Boun, when Pad was captured at the "friendly" farmhouse, information of the sighting spread to both sides that the escapees were most likely headed north. Enemy patrols reluctantly moved into unfamiliar mountainous territory that they were uncomfortable traversing. Vang Pao also dispatched Meo teams to different points a short distance south of Bouam Long to locate and escort the men to safety. There was one firefight between searching patrols, but working in the familiarity of their backyard, the Meo had the advantage.

On Tuesday, 1 September, Doctor Weldon had been working in Xieng Khouang Province. Prior to returning to Vientiane, he stopped at Long Tieng to follow up on his wife, Doctor Patricia McCready's previous visit to minister to one of General Vang Pao's seriously ill children. After ascertaining that the child was doing well, he and VP were enjoying tea and conversation on the front porch when an excited radio operator approached with a message from Sua Pao, Lima Site-88's commander. A Pathet Lao army sergeant and an American pilot had contacted his soldiers at a forward outpost, and they were being brought to Bouam Long. If accurate, this was big news. ³

A Bird and Son Porter, flown by Lloyd Zimmerman, landed in the Long Tieng Valley. Vang Pao and Weldon excitedly left the house and Jeeped to the airstrip with the intention of flying to

³ Vang Pao's spies had previously ascertained Klusmann's location at the Khang Khay prison. After I returned from leave, while discussing Klusmann's plight, Tony indicated that previous attempts to rescue him had come to naught. As to the actual escape, Pat Landry stated to the Author years later that no Agency operation was involved.

Bouam Long. Jiggs elected to go because the message had not specified the pilot's physical condition. Vang Pao wanted to go for the prestige, but in the excitement, he forgot an important staff meeting that he could not avoid. Case Officer Terry Burke was already boarding the plane when they arrived. A kerosene refrigerator had recently been installed in the operations building, from which Burke extracted a six-pack of cold San Miguel beer. The trio departed at 1730 hours, and within the hour, landed on the narrow razorback ridge. Sua Pao met them and indicated that the villagers were bringing the American to the strip.

It was almost dark when Klusmann heard the plane circle and land. Before napping, he removed his boots. In the interim, his damaged feet had swelled to such proportions that he was unable to slip back into the footwear. Therefore, the Meo gave him some flip-flops and they started up the hill.

Burke insisted that Doc and Zim wait at the plane while, as the only armed and ever paranoid American, he dashed down the trail to better assess the situation. He realized that there was no reason for concern when he observed the bearded pilot surrounded and being helped along the trail by happy men, women, and children. In a "Doctor Livingstone, I presume" fashion, he inquired, "Lieutenant Charles Klusmann?"⁴

Introductions commenced when the party reached the airstrip. Doc Weldon was shocked to see both men glowing an iridescent bright red, courtesy of the medic's liberal application of Merthiolate solution. Jiggs conducted a quick examination of Klusmann. Satisfied that both his physical and

⁴ Chuck later informed Terry Burke that those were the best words he had ever heard.

mental condition were acceptable for travel, for posterity, he began snapping photos of the two fortunate men. ⁵

It was sunset (1835-hours) when the Americans departed Site-88. Klusmann was reluctant to leave his savior, Boun Mi, at Bouam Long. However, Zim considered a landing in the inky Sam Tong bowl too dangerous to attempt and the Pathet Lao's presence at the Udorn base was forbidden. Therefore, Jiggs gained assurances from Sua Pao that Boun Mi would be well cared for that night and transferred to Sam Tong the following day.

This Porter was configured with a drop door for airdrops and had only one seat for the pilot. Therefore, all passengers were obligated to sit on the metal deck. Once airborne, Chuck kept repeating, *"I can not believe it."*

Zim interrupted saying, *"We were going to provide martinis for you, but how about a cold San Miguel?"* With that, he passed a couple cool ones back to Terry, who popped the tops and distributed them.

While sipping his "San Mickey" Klusmann exclaimed, *"Now I really cannot believe it."*

During the one hour and twenty-five minute flight to Udorn, Chuck happily related a colorful account of his shoot down, his three-month experience in captivity, his escape, and subsequent trek to safety. Weldon noted that the story he told was relatively unemotional and calm in delivery. Events, although not so funny at the time, now seemed hilarious. As they soared over the Mekong River, still in sight of the lights of Vientiane, he grew pensive, possibly wondering if his nightmare was truly over.

⁵ While visiting the Author's house in Metairie, Louisiana, Chuck Klusmann displayed a photograph taken at Bouam Long. It showed a bearded and grossly underweight young man. Unfortunately, I did not obtain a copy of the photo for this story.

After arriving at the Udorn airport, the tower operator told Zim to pull off to the side of the taxiway, where a black Air Force car was parked with two uniformed people standing alongside. Terry went to investigate. When he reached the two officers, they threw their arms around him saying that he was now safe. The scruffy-looking Burke sheepishly advised them that he was merely an escort. The object of their affection was still in the Porter. Klusmann was whisked away, and Terry did not see him again for many years. Instead, he went to the Air America Club and called his wife to join him for some celebratory libation.

Jiggs observed Klusmann entering the military vehicle and being driven to a building two hundred yards away. No one said a word to him so, feeling slighted, he returned to Vientiane on another Bird aircraft.

The attending Air Force doctor administered an initial injection that was followed by a meal. Then, with ten people representing the Second Air Division/6499 Support Group, Thai Headquarters 333, AB-1, and Air America present, Chuck was debriefed in a transient room across the pool from Ben Moore's quarters. Claiming that he was Klusmann's relative, Dick Elder attempted to attend the debriefing, but was summarily excluded.

Wayne Knight attended with Ben Moore. He recalls Klusmann being very emotional. Hardly anyone spoke as Chuck related his treatment, escape attempts, and his successful escape and evasion. He mentioned attempting three unsuccessful escapes by digging under walls and fences (this does not tally with his later recall of one). Pickets placed deep in the ground thwarted at least one escape attempt. He was abused after each escape attempt, mostly mental and ration denial, but some physical. One of the young intelligence types inquired why he persisted in attempting to escape, since he was treated harshly after each

failed attempt. Klusmann passionately replied, "*Mister, I have a young son at home, who I would not be able to look in the eye if I had not attempted escape. It was my duty as a U.S. Naval Officer.*" They were strong, stinging words that left a lasting impression on the gathering and humbled the Air Force people. The statement also caused Ben and Wayne to stand proud and tall.

Part way through the debriefing, FIC Vientiane Bill Solin barged into the crowded room. Uninvited, he took one look at almost a dozen frosty glares and beat a hasty retreat.

In the past, as part of his cooperation with FIC's goals, Earl Jones had arranged for Solin to receive intelligence briefings from various sources in Udorn. As this benefit was not counter to Bill's job description or Company policy, he had made several fruitful trips to Udorn. ⁶

The Vientiane Operations Specialists were vitally interested in learning firsthand about Klusmann's experiences. From the beginning of his shoot down, Air America personnel had been intimately involved in his rescue attempts, and the FIC men were concerned with the success of these attempts, and any other information the pilot might provide that might help make the pilots' task a little safer in Laos. Learning of the rescue and the ensuing flight to Udorn, Solin hurriedly asked Earl Jones's representative if he could attend the planned debriefing. The man discouraged his intentions, but did not directly forbid the journey. He merely indicated that it was late, and attending the debriefing would not be particularly valuable at this time; he could go down another day to obtain information. Therefore, not specifically being prohibited, Solin had made a decision to go to the debriefing.

⁶ Before FIC was created in Udorn, I recall talking to both Solin and Mullen regarding our operations in Laos.

When Jones learned of Solin's rashness, he believed Bill deliberately went to Udorn in violation of his request, which caused him personal embarrassment.

Following a more comprehensive physical examination and a hot shower, the exhausted Klusmann was sent to bed in the Air America transient aircrew quarters.

Klusmann publicity generated in Vientiane and Udorn was minor with only a small group of Air Force officers aware of his presence. The U.S. Embassy recommended disseminating minimal information to curtail focus on the area. Therefore, a cover story was concocted that portrayed Klusmann being rescued by a friendly tribesman, who contacted FAR units.

The following morning General Moore sent a T-39 pilot to deliver Klusmann to his Saigon headquarters. Following additional debriefings, Chuck boarded a Navy flight to Cubi Point, where he cleaned up, and then traveled from Clark AFB by a charter flight to the Naval base at San Diego, California.

During very detailed debriefings, intelligence officers picked Chuck's brain regarding enemy weapons he had seen. He also worked with people from the survival school for a few days just before a major conference. Recognizing a pressing need to upgrade combat pilots' survival tools, he recommended that the supply system issue two-way voice radios in lieu of the current beeper. Other survival items should be assessed as to their actual usefulness, and those deemed excess deleted from the cockpit seat packs. Maps of the pertinent target areas were needed, instead of the bulky ones covering all of Southeast Asia. Camouflage flight suits should replace the khaki and distinctive orange ones currently in use. Blood chits, such as those carried by American Volunteer Group (AVG-Flying Tiger) pilots in China, identifying the pilot as an American, and offering a reward for assistance, should be carried by

crewmembers. The subject of improved boots became one of his favorite projects. Finding it difficult to walk through the jungle and rainy season conditions with smooth soles during his trek to safety, he had cut grooves in the soles to provide better traction. This helped somewhat, so he diagramed better footwear with serrated soles that during normal walking would remain uncluttered and force mud out to the sides. Action was not immediate, for recommendations had to be considered and forwarded through slow chains of command. Additionally, some more radical ideas required new manufacturing designs and funding. Consequently, there was delay in implementation, but eventually many of Klusmann's recommendations were adopted for the evolving Southeast Asian Theater.

Klusmann spent a large portion of the next three months as an outpatient at the Balboa Hospital trying to rid his system of parasites and having his teeth repaired. He experienced recurrent fevers and light-headedness for more than ten-years, which he attempted to conceal from the flight surgeon. Sometimes he was so sick that he wanted to hide his head under a pillow. Klusmann retired as a U.S. Navy Captain.

DISPOSITION OF BOUN MI

Instead of going to Sam Tong, Boun Mi was flown to Long Tieng and held under closely guarded house arrest pending further disposition and possible interrogation in Vientiane. While at Alternate, he was questioned and endured physical persuasion, but he was not seriously abused. He did receive food and water. ⁷

⁷ This portion of the Klusmann story is marred by slightly different accounts by Doctor Charles Weldon and Blaine Jensen about Boun Mi. However, the accounts do not materially alter the major facts relating to the escape and rescue, so I will defer to the Jensen account.

When Pop and Jiggs discovered what had happened to the boy and the treatment he was receiving from VP's people, they were concerned about USG's image. Therefore, Pop went to Site-20A (still called Site-98 in official correspondence) to convince Vang Pao that the lad was all right because he had rescued an American. Taking the position that a leopard never changes spots, Vang Pao was stubborn and reluctant to release Boun Mi. In the end, a compromise was arranged with the warlord: Pop would take him to Sam Tong to work, Vang Pao's agents would closely monitor his activity, and he would not be allowed to leave the Sam Tong complex for a long time. Part of the agreement allowed "Jiggs" to visit and ensure that Boun Mi was not being physically harmed.

Within a few days, Boun Mi and six well-armed guards were air lifted across the ridge to Site-20. As neither Pop nor "Jigs" were on location when the contingent arrived, Blaine housed them in the AID warehouse and fed them for a few days until other arrangements could be made. The arrival created a stir among AID's counterparts, who were convinced that Pop had lost his mind to help an enemy Pathet Lao. The six guards remained for more than a month, at which time the number was reduced to two for an additional three months.

Boun Mi immediately went to work in the warehouse loading and unloading refugee supplies under Buell and Jensen guidance. As it required time and paperwork to process him for addition to the USAID payroll, Jiggs initially carried him on his project account as a medic.

Despite prior Pathet Lao affiliation, while at Sam Tong Boun was never overtly abused by the RLG or any friendly element. Indeed, he was rewarded and feted at a reception by a Lao minister, and he received considerable adulation among the

Americans for helping Klusmann successfully escape enemy captivity.

When Boun Mi first arrived at Sam Tong, he sensed that the Meo did not trust him and he did not feel comfortable among them. Fearing for his life, he opted to live with Black Tai residents Joe Baccam and his mother. He indicated that he had been a prisoner at Khang Khay. After several months of protection and good treatment by the Americans, he began to trust them and allegedly told the truth concerning his role in the Klusmann saga. According to him, he was not a prisoner before meeting Chuck. His actual job had been guarding prisoners. The Pathet Lao employed a system, whereby they would plant one of their own people with a POW to gain his confidence and obtain information. Fascinated with the American, he asked for and was granted the surveillance job.

Boun was not totally confined and had access to the outside at times. ⁸ After the two communicated for awhile and became friendly, Boun said he proposed escaping, at which time, Chuck promised him a lot of money to help. That tipped the scales, for Boun was single, extremely disenchanted with the Pathet Lao, the communist doctrine, and the way they treated him as a second-class Lao Theung citizen. He had nothing to lose by attempting to escape.

After hearing the revised story, the Sam Tong Americans believed Boun Mi was telling the truth. Concerning the issue of taking care of Boun Mi, there may have been some misunderstanding regarding the amount of money involved, but they believed Klusmann had made a promise he was obligated to

⁸ This account adequately fits Klusmann's description of how someone knew details of the security system, the method of evading the concertina wire, and how one might escape.

keep. Therefore, Pop wrote to Klus indicating that Boun had most likely saved his life and he should care for him financially. After several scathing letters from Pop, a letter was received from Klusmann containing 500 dollars. The hand written letter stated that given his financial situation, the money was all he could afford. As it settled his debt to Boun Mi, no more funds would be forthcoming.⁹

After more than two years, the Meo were satisfied that Boun Mi would no longer cause them problems. Because he was still not comfortable living among the Meo, he was allowed to relocate to Vientiane. A special fund was tapped to purchase Boun a modest home. He was retained on the Sam Thong payroll for a long time after he left, and Pop delivered his salary when able. Pop sent him to driver's training school, where he earned a license and finally achieved his dream. Then, through some contacts, Pop found him a decent paying job. Finally, to protect him from Pathet Lao retribution, his Lao Theung family name was altered

⁹ As would happen to many future POWs following release from incarceration, Chuck was undergoing a divorce at the time. The letter was signed with Klusmann's rank and wing division. Pop was furious for a time.

Blaine Jensen poses another scenario. Pop had been creating a stir with Ambassador Unger, the chief of station, the attaches, and both Bill Lair and Pat Landry over his perception that Klusmann had failed in his obligation to Boun Mi. Blaine postulates that the letter Buell read was not actually from Klusmann, who claimed that he never received Pop's letters. The Agency or the military could have written the letter and forwarded money to pacify Buell. At any rate, Pop calmed somewhat after receiving the letter.

to Sivilay.¹⁰

Boun Mi continued to write Chuck for years through an intermediary and then contact was lost.¹¹

¹⁰ According to Doctor Weldon, Sivilay is a common Lao family name and a combination of two Sanskrit words, sri=glorious and vilay=beautiful; the lad's given name translated to Boun=merit, Mi=to have or a person of merit.

¹¹ The segment includes information from:
 Charles Klusmann Emails, 11/27/97 (through Allen Cates), 12/06/97, 07/17/98.
 Charles Klusmann Phone Calls, 11/28/97, 12/10/97.
 Klusmann Military Debriefing-no date.
 Klusmann Article, The Price of Freedom, 12/27/97.
 Chuck Klusmann Interview at the Author's House, 04/03/98.
 Memorandum to Ambassador Unger from Charles Weldon, 09/04/64.
 Doctor Charles Weldon Papers, Boun Mi.
 Charles Weldon Emails, 03/13/98, 08/19/98.
 Terry Burke Email, 02/20/04.
 Leonard Unger Message to State, 09/02/64.
 Tom Walker, History of the FIC.
 Wayne Knight Emails, 03/31/01, 04/02/01, 04/07/01, 04/10/01.
 Blaine Jensen Letters, 02/17/98, 03/13/98, 05/09/98, 08/27/98.
 Pat Landry Interview Bangkok, Thailand.

Five days before departing Kennedy International Airport for Southeast Asia, I journeyed to New York City to deposit 10,000 dollars in the Franklin Society Federal Savings and Loan Association Bank. Interest rates were low in regular commercial bank accounts, so after reading a Franklin advertisement in the *Wall Street Journal*, I decided to effect a switch to a higher paying certificate of deposit.

I rode to Port Newark on the Jersey Central train that Dad had traveled for decades, and boarded the Hudson cross-river ferry. I was no stranger to this delightful mode of transportation, as Dad had taken me to the city many times while still a youngster. Sometimes, the exciting trips were enhanced because Gus Nausch, our next-door neighbor, was the ferryboat Captain, who allowed me to manipulate the steering mechanism. Not all trips were devoid of incident. While crossing the Hudson River on 28 July, just before ten o'clock, during an exceptionally foggy morning in 1945, we heard over the radio that a U.S. Army-piloted B-25 had flown into the upper levels of the Empire State building. We went to the area, but it was already cordoned off with police barriers to prevent falling debris from injuring pedestrians. ¹

On this particular morning, when I departed the ferry and began walking past the smelly fish market on Fulton Street, my eyes began smarting and watering excessively from airborne pollutants. Such trauma had never happened to me before. There was certainly cause for respiratory concern, as many chemical and other industrial manufacturing plants and burning garbage

¹ This incident stood for decades until the 9/11 terrorist downing of the Twin Towers.

dumps proliferated in the area, pumping noxious substances into the atmosphere. Any slight change in wind direction, or an inversion layer, could inundate the entire area. I wondered if the pollution affected other inhabitants as it had me.

Following a long and boring 707 trip across the Pacific, I cleared Don Muang customs officials on 8 September. The vacation had been restful, but not quite long enough to forget all the stress and confusion fostered by my errors and the increased action in Laos. Despite jet-lag fatigue, instead of resting in Bangkok for a day or two, I elected to return to Udorn. This was a huge mistake, for I was almost immediately scheduled for what developed into twelve continuous days on the flight schedule.

LOCAL ITEMS

Sang was not at Sopa Villa. In her absence, she had arranged for a young girl to care for the house and feed Caesar, who looked well. Cursing Mister Santos, I noted with "I told you so" dismay that my meager, but prized possessions stored in the green footlocker were missing. However, I had no time to investigate or solve the dilemma.

There had been personnel changes at the base while I was on leave. Toward the end of August, Abadie had transitioned back from his more than yearlong assignment at Taipei headquarters. As planned, he resumed a management position as the Chief of Operations, a position vacant since Jim Coble's resignation. For a time, with few guidelines, he was at loose ends in the COO position. Officially Wayne's superior, Ab generally left him alone to perform the CPH job, which entailed nearly all operational field matters. Leaning on his Taipei experience, Abadie was more interested in the facility's bricks and mortar infrastructure. Unless Wayne was on STO or absent for business

purposes, Ab rarely become involved in the operational aspect of the Maddriver project. ²

Captain Bill Cook was gone. In management's eyes, his termination was long overdue. He had been on Ben Moore's sierra list regarding the beard/haircut policy, and other major infractions for a long time. Additionally, he may have been primed and ready to leave Air America.

It had all come to a head one Sunday afternoon when the "Golden Age of Comedy" film was showing in the Club movie room. Since it was a slow period, Wayne suggested that Ben attend the movie to relax. The flick was probably the only one Ben saw while in Udorn. Always unconventional and stubborn, Cook was sitting in the theater smoking a cigarette in the restricted area. Following a dressing down, the strict disciplinarian ejected him. Still miffed at Cook, Ben consulted Wayne saying, *"Isn't it about time we get rid of this guy?"* Wayne, never especially fond of Cook, because of his deceit and negative attitudes, agreed. However, because previous incidents had never been recorded in detail, a viable cause for his release could not be well documented. Despite this, Ben signed off on the termination papers.

Cook went to Taipei for the customary out-processing. While there, he talked to his friend Abadie. He claimed that he did not know why he was being fired. Of course, this was yet another Cook falsehood, for Wayne had carefully explained to Bill his accumulation of offenses, starting with the infamous "Nookie" Hagins shooting, the suspicious circumstances of the Hotel Foxtrot crash with Dick Todd in the Sam Tong area, and a missing movement while engaged with a prostitute in a Bangkok hotel. Despite several appeals from Taipei to reconsider the

² EW Knight Emails.

termination, it was permanently sealed when the Base Manager indicated he would no longer allow Cook to pilot Air America helicopters. He was allowed to return to Udorn and dispose of his household goods.

Reasons for Cook's termination were not freely divulged throughout the Air America community. Consequently, even though many transgressions were well known, speculation waxed rife in the bar. A lesser-known factor contributing to his release that later surfaced might have involved Cook showing his English neighbors, Doctor and Elizabeth Reed, forbidden 8mm movies of sensitive areas in Laos. Doctor Reed was a somewhat odd, older man specializing in native leprosy research and eradication of the disease. His job frequently took him away from home, ministering to disease-stricken northeast people. Despite raising a lovely family consisting of two small tow-headed children, it was whispered that Reed may have suffered from erectile dysfunction. Mrs. Reed, a tall, beautiful, wholesome looking blonde may have possessed excessive physical sexual appetites which her husband was unable to satisfy. In his wife Dottie's absence, Cook had reputedly engaged in lusty adultery with the woman. As if this were not enough, according to Tony Poe, AB-1 suspected Elizabeth, and likely the doctor, of working for British MI-6 intelligence. The basis for Tony's opinion may have originated with Terry Burke, who lived in the same compound, and indicated that Doctor Reed always pressed him to reveal what he was doing upcountry. Coupled with screening prohibited movies and an intimate relationship with a reputed

spy, Cook breached Agency security tolerance. ¹

After the Cooks placed their household goods on sale, on 1 September, Joan McCasland went to their house to learn how to drive the Vespa scooter Lou was purchasing. The following day, a surprise going away party for the Cooks was held at the Peterson family home. Along with Joan, the Buxton and Marshall families attended the event. Soon afterward, the Cooks became history. ^{2 3}

GODDARD

Former Marine H-34 pilot Phil Goddard was hired in August. Stout and displaying a prominent English nose, Phil, with an American mother and English father, grew up on Barbados Island. The family owned a successful airline catering business, which caused some to speculate why he subjected himself to harm's way. Sociable in the bar, Phil effected the demeanor of a consummate politician, and appeared an excellent addition to our growing pilot force. When the Cooks departed, he moved into their house in anticipation of his family's arrival. Goddard would soon become a key player in our small group.

¹ Perhaps there was an understanding with her husband, for after Cook's departure Elizabeth continued affairs with Bird & Son and Air America pilots over the years. Neighbors in the know indicated she hung a towel over the balcony rail signaling suitors that the doctor was out of town.

² Bill and Dottie, a beautiful woman, later divorced. In later years, she became a millionaire by successfully hawking Electrolux vacuum cleaners door to door and then moving into a management position. Bill eventually became a FAA inspector and retired as a government employee.

³ Mike Marshall Email, 08/15/99, 08/17/99.
EW Knight Email, 05/07/00.
Joan McCasland September 1964 Diary.
Terry Burke Email, 09/10/06.
Mike Marshall Notes.



Captain Phil Goddard

At the end of August, while mop up operations in Military Region Two continued following Triangle's resounding success, little hostile activity was noted in FAR controlled areas. To the east of Long Tieng, government T-28s bombed and strafed enemy and artillery positions south and southeast of Tha Thom. However, bomb delivery assessment (BDA) was considered sketchy. The push to retake the area continued, but bad weather prevented further sorties. ¹

Mike Marshall deadheaded on the Bird Pioneer to Sam Tong on the first day of September. After assuming control of Hotel-15, he and Punzalan were dispatched southeast to Paksane in support of the continuing effort to reclaim Tha Thom. During the morning, he supplied a level site surrounded by tall trees northeast of Borikhane which contained a listening post of fifteen troops and trench lines. While returning for another load, the engine burped and then exploded, forcing him to autorotate onto the Borikhane strip. Inspection revealed that a cylinder had swallowed an exhaust valve and completely separated from its mounts. Fuel and oil spewed out entirely covering the hot engine. In retrospect, Mike, who failed to secure the engine until after landing, considered it indeed fortunate he was close to the landing strip and the combustible liquids did not catch fire.

A quick engine change unit (QEC), mounted on an engine stand at the Air America maintenance facility, was delivered to Borikhane by a Caribou crew. Captain Jack Connor ferried maintenance people into the strip to begin removal of the

¹ Lao Country Files, Situation Report, 08/29/64.

damaged engine. Punz remained in the field to begin removing engine accessories and to safeguard Hotel-15, while Mike rode home with Jack. Two days later Marshall returned to perform a required engine break in and conduct a slow-flight to Udorn.²

Although subject to occur at any time, as previously mentioned, H-34 engine failures were generally seasonal, peaking during the hot, dry, dusty March through April months. However, it became increasingly apparent now that with increased flight requirements and high monthly time generated in mid-1964, the pattern had changed. Marshall's and other similar incidents generally marked the beginning of serious engine and other maintenance problems that plagued the helicopter program during the fall of 1964 and well into 1965.

In the quest to recover the Tha Thom Valley, air operations pressure on Pathet Lao forces continued in the hills and ridgelines adjacent to Route-4 and around enemy-held Tha Vieng. Since enemy supply trucks still rolled south out of Xieng Khouang Ville, operational requirements emboldened Case Officers, civilian pilots, and other individuals associated with daily T-28 strikes to bend the rules of engagement (ROE). Therefore, a flap arose in Vientiane when unauthorized contract aircraft were discovered being used to FAC and spot for T-28 strikes. Certainly initiated from Long Tieng by General Vang Pao's request for air artillery, the process probably had been occurring for a long time. However, it was only brought to the attention of AIRA Chief Colonel Tyrell on 9 September following an elated T-28 pilot's debriefing describing a very successful strike mission.

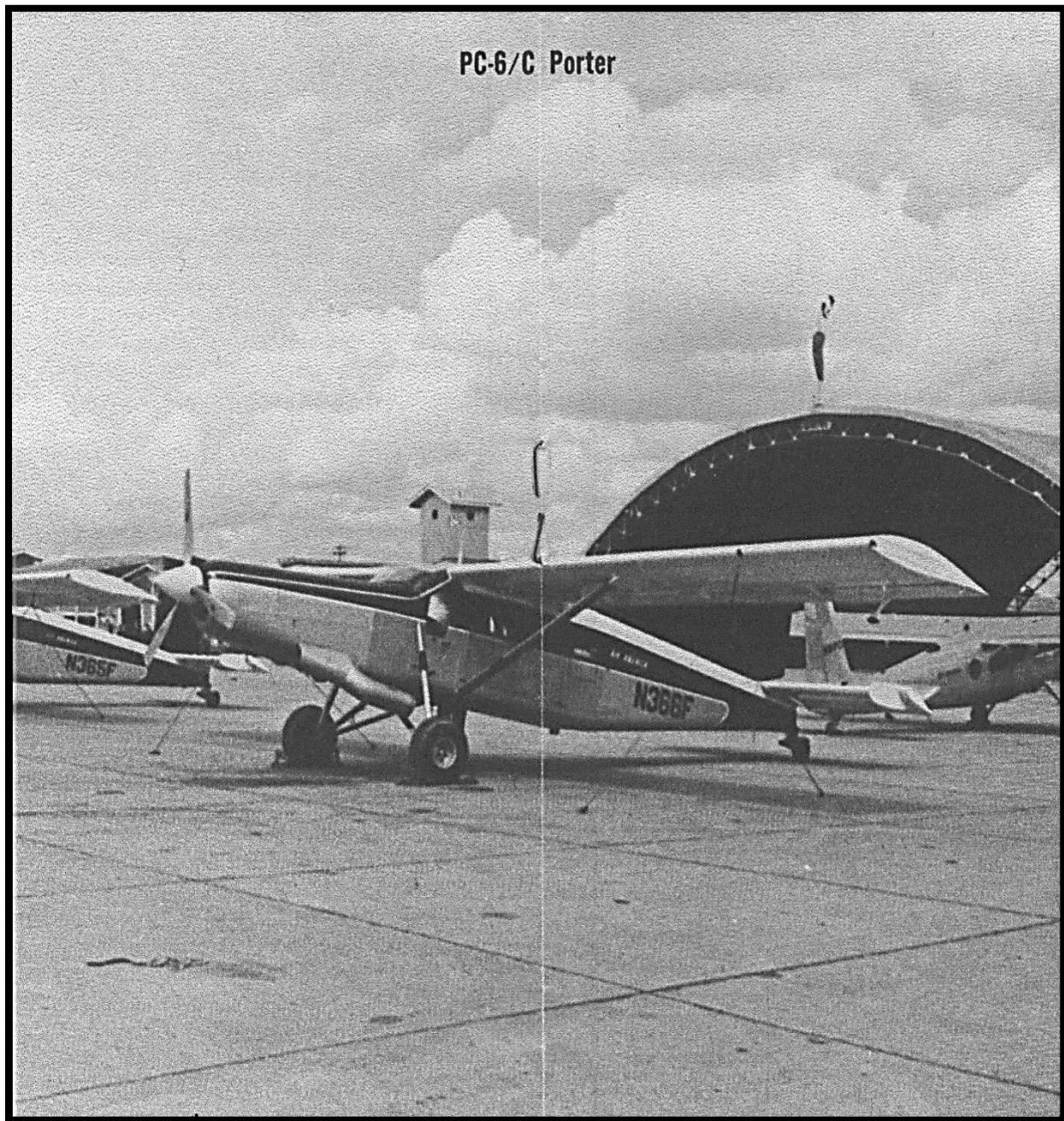
² Mike Marshall Emails, 08/25/99, 08/27/99.
Slow Flight: By the book-reduced RPM and power for specified time periods.

Lloyd Zimmerman, a short, rotund former Alaska bush pilot, was a principal in the ensuing investigation. Lloyd, a fearless Bird Porter pilot, whose motto was to "let everything hang out," appeared to some of us to possess more guts than brains. Like Bird's Pioneer crews who had been operating for a couple of years out of Long Tieng, the Pilatus Porter was recognized as a far superior STOL aircraft than the Helio Courier in performing drop and reconnaissance missions. Like Dick Douglas and Eldon Walker before him, Lloyd and his Porter became a favorite air support tool of Tony Poe and his associates to not only accomplish normal, but also "special work" in Military Region Two. Therefore, it was no surprise that in close collaboration with the aggressive Poe and his former Marine protégé Terry Burke, concerned that daytime enemy convoys were moving unimpeded south from Xieng Khouang Ville on Route-4, the trio began experimenting with a unique form of road interdiction.

THE AIR AMERICA PORTER

Air America management types, long admirers of the Helio Courier's attributes, were not initially keen about obtaining Pilatus Porters. Although deemed an excellent STOL plane, with a high horsepower reciprocating engine and high lift wing, the plane did not match the safety of the Helio's tubular construction, and it was easily damaged on rough upcountry strips. It also had a disturbing aerodynamic design feature, and had to be flown carefully. With the flaps down during a STOL configuration landing, the tail surfaces would stall before the wing. This could cause the nose to pitch up in an unusual landing attitude.

Not to be undone by the Bird company which had been flying the Porter upcountry since late 1962, Air America management



Two blue and silver "N" registered Pilatus Porters parked on the Air America ramp at Wattay Airport. A Helio Courier parked to the rear of 68F.

Air America Log.

(mainly Chief Executive Officer (CEO) George Doole) after finally recognizing the Porter's superior capability and advantages, purchased one. On 20 October, Fred Walker told Captain Rick Byrne to pack his bag. He was leaving the following day for Zurich, Switzerland to transport a Porter back to Wattay Airport. After a week of ground school and flight training, Rick ferried November-185X-ray through nine fuel or overnight stops before arriving in Vientiane.

During a six-month shakedown period, the Porter flew mostly for USAID in Thailand. At that time, under most conditions, the plane was able to haul seven passengers and a little over 1,600 pounds, twice the payload of a Helio Courier. Early models were equipped with a French manufactured Astazou engine. It was propelled by a spring-loaded electric propeller that would revert to a feathered position after an electrical failure. During the period in Thailand, one crashed in December and another in January. Investigation discovered that fine mesh fuel filters sometimes clogged, causing the engines to fail.

Ben Coleman told the Author about his hairy experience when a Porter's Astazou engine failed while approaching the short Chiang Khong runway. When the prop feathered, he lost aircraft control and was at the mercy of the falling body. Ben was thrown out the door and survived the crash.

A retrofit of the reciprocal Lycoming engines proved little better, as the power plants were found initially to be underpowered. During May 1965, George Doole ordered eight of the licensed Fairchild Hiller version of the Pilatus Porter for 95,000 dollars a plane. Equipped with Turbo PC-6 and Garrett TPE-331-25D engines, they were decidedly more suited for the arduous mountain work. Equipped with an engine reverse prop setting to aid after landing breaking capability, the ship was

recognized as a superior model. Beginning in October 1965, two planes were slated to be delivered every other month.

While deadheading to Long Tieng, the Author recalls PIC Zim Dembowski demonstrating the Beta power mode. After activation, the aircraft impressively climbed straight upward. Acting as an airbrake, the Beta mode could also be used in sixty degree descents without incurring additional airspeed.

To maintain competition, Bird, then Continental Air Services (CAS) retrofitted the plane with the impressive Pratt and Whitney (PT-6) gas turbine engine.

Soon after Bird's Pilatus Porter appearance in Laos, some aircraft were refitted and configured with a sizeable trap door in the decking behind the pilot. The device functioned to enable a solo pilot, without benefit of a kicker, to airdrop bagged rice, salt, and other commodities from low altitudes to designated drop zones.

The process initially entailed some danger, as a village chief later unfortunately discovered while spotting for an Air America pilot. After pointing to the drop zone, the unwitting chief plopped down on top of the stacked rice bags. One can imagine the old boy's surprise when the pilot, engrossed in flying and maintaining a visual on the drop area, yanked the lanyard and treated the chief to the final thrill of his life. A later radio message to Sam Tong from the village thanked Pop for the airdrop, but questioned the untimely delivery of their leader. ³

THE CIVILIAN BOMBER PILOT

For Long Tieng Case Officers, the Porter proved a perfect mechanism for ersatz bombing missions. Since the drop platform

³ Bill Leary 1964, 1965 Notes, UTD.

accommodated almost any small object, during nightly booze sessions, Tony, Terry, and Lloyd mulled over their bag of dirty tricks, and they conceived a unique simple and economic plan to terrorize and interdict Route-4. In lieu of scarce AIRA, tightly controlled FAR T-28 assets, harking back to medieval castle warfare, they employed rocks as lethal airborne missiles.

Late one afternoon, Lloyd landed at Long Tieng and informed Burke that an enemy convoy was proceeding south down the road. They hurriedly stacked pre-positioned football sized rocks in the recessed drop door, and then headed east across Padong Ridge toward the target. Diving at maximum VNE (maximum allowed speed), Lloyd attacked from the rear, releasing the ordnance halfway down the column. Except for halting the trucks and observing troops scurrying around in "Chicken Little" confusion, battle damage assessments (BDA) results were difficult to assess. The airborne warriors departed the area, satisfied that they had graphically signaled the enemy they could no longer travel the road during daylight hours with complete impunity. Terry and Lloyd would continue to harass the enemy with several new unorthodox tactics in future weeks.

The "bombing" attacks were effective on the supply columns, as were later described in a captured Pathet Lao soldier's diary. While in a truck under attack from the Porter, the man described the damage done and the fear generated by dropped grenades and machine gun fire. During that particular attack, several North Vietnamese soldiers had been killed or wounded.

Eager to improve upon air strike capability, during other nightly beer or rice wine sessions, Tony and Lloyd conceived another ambitious plan: obtaining real iron bombs. Tony had a number of 1903 Springfield rifles in storage that long ago had been exchanged with Meo troops for more modern M-1 and M-2 rifles. Tony provided Zim with a few of these bolt-action

weapons, so favored by avid hunters for their simplicity and accuracy. He took several south to Udorn and exchanged them for 250-pound bombs from Det-6 personnel. Then he shuttled a handful of these to Long Tieng.

When work moderated, or they were simply bored, the men loaded a couple of bombs on the Porter and departed for enemy territory in search of lucrative targets. After spotting a tempting position, Poe would roll a bomb into the drop door recess and arm it. Then Lloyd jettisoned it over the target. This fun did not last long. A radio communications intercept in Udorn recorded traffic between Vietnamese units in Laos and North Vietnam talking about a civilian plane dropping bombs on their positions. Curious embassy personnel heard the accusation and arranged over flights to confirm the report. The boys at Long Tieng learned of this investigation and ceased further sorties. However, they retained one white phosphorous bomb, which remained hidden under rice bags in the warehouse. ⁴

Zimmerman's T-28 diversion and employment to strike enemy targets on 8 and 9 September was further investigated. When queried by superiors, Long Tieng Case Officers indicated the pilot of a STOL aircraft performing a rice drop mission near Tha Vieng had been previously briefed to avoid a hostile ridgeline near his drop zone. While in the area, he sighted a T-28 flight and pointed out the enemy position, which they subsequently struck.

Zim's sanitized "official" statement for Vientiane consumption shed more light on the matter. It indicated that while returning to Site-20 Alternate in Papa Bravo Lima from a

⁴ Terry Burke Email, 03/10/03.
Terry Burke *Early Days*, 09/10/06.
Terry Burke Email, 03/06/07.

rice drop, he was informed by a relaying Caribou that Vientiane Operations wanted him to direct T-28 pilots on targets. During refueling, he was briefed with details regarding the target. Then, loaded with smoke grenades, he departed and rendezvoused with the T-28s. After marking the target from 4,000 feet, the Tangos successfully performed the job.

What actually occurred was slightly different from Zim's statement and remained largely in house. Lloyd had been dropping rice and spotted the enemy position that T-28 pilots had failed to locate. He called FIC Vientiane and offered to direct T-28 pilots to the target after refueling. At Long Tieng, Zim consulted with Terry Burke and requested several smoke grenades to mark the position. None were available, but Terry remembered the sole "Willy Pete" bomb languishing in the warehouse. Believing it would create a dandy marking device and at the same time rid them of the last incriminating evidence of their fun, he had locals roll it to the plane. The bomb was preloaded in the drop door and rigged so Lloyd could activate it from his cockpit seat. Lloyd rendezvoused with the T-28s and dropped his marker with precision. The fighters hit the position, but there was little left of it following the accurate marking round. A representative of the Air Attaché's Office, observing the marking and subsequent air strike, commented and questioned the massive explosion and smoke from the initial marking. The illogical explanation: a large number of smoke flares were packaged together.

Documentation of the ensuing inquiry revealed the interest of AIRA, the COS, Bird & Son and Air America. The episode was traced to and eventually implicated FIC Operations specialists Jim Mullen, Bill Solin, and AOC Air Force Captain DW Randle. The incidents created a flap in all Customer circles. FIC personnel denied any conspiracy to utilize Air America and Bird aircraft

to direct T-28 pilots to targets, but pertinent evidence concluded that the men were to blame.

Their jobs in jeopardy, Operations Specialists Mullens and Solin were retained, but Station Manager Dave Hickler and Assistant Station Manager TC Walker set specific guidelines for them as to their duties and responsibilities. Additionally, their travel privileges were curtailed, their contact with the AOC group reduced, and Assistant Station Manager TC Walker, after cautioning them on future conduct, was assigned to monitor their activities.

Apparently, the men learned their lesson. By 12 October there were no more earth shaking incidents. After a Senior Operations Specialist's projected arrival in Vientiane, management hoped a smoother running FIC would result. ⁵

Toward month's end, another negative incident again called attention to FIC personnel. An air operations center (AOC) representative was ordered to Saigon to brief various military units on aspects of SAR operations in Laos. The AOC attempted to have an Operations Specialist from FIC accompany him to present the briefing. Instead of processing through appropriate channels, the man attempted to promote Bill Solin as the representative attending the meeting.

Air America Vientiane had received no official invitation to the meeting. When the issue was brought to the attention of the Assistant Station Manager, he contacted the AIRA office, stating that Air America would send someone to the meeting pending an official invitation. The representative would likely be Operations Manager Larry Joseph (also an undercover CIA

⁵ Confidential Letter to Douglas Blaufarb, Colonel Tyrell, AIRAM Dave Hickler, USAID/EO/AIR Jones.
TC Walker, *History of the FIC*.
Terry Burke Email, 03/06/07.

operative). However, when the AOC captain heard of this decision, he said that if it was not Solin, he did not want anyone from Air America. As a result, Company management did not send anyone to the meeting.

I have no record of information presented during the meeting. From our perspective, it was unfortunate one of our more knowledgeable representatives did not attend this early SAR meeting. At a critical time, the U.S. military required as much information as possible regarding our limited capability, needs, and priorities to conduct successful SAR operations in Laos. Despite the fact that other meetings were probably held since the initial 15 June conference in Udorn, we were still far from working together and cooperating as a cohesive team in the Theater.

Since its inception, there were a number of positive trends in the SAR business. However, encouraging movement was turtle walk slow, much like a municipal installation of a traffic light at an intersection after fatalities. Since the Bill Zeitler shoot down, more emphasis from higher echelons stimulated additional SOPs, but overall operations were still conducted in a military muddle through process.

Because of a perceived need to keep the world press uninformed and to preserve a reasonable facade of Laos' neutral status, SAR business during 1964 and into 1965 remained in a sad state of affairs. Except during the everyday working level by the men who conducted the missions, there was excessive secrecy involved at the planning level. In the Author's view, the seemingly low priority of SAR operations contributed to the death or capture of many good airmen. It was almost like the "powers who be" operated in a state of denial, hoping the SAR problem **they** created would fade away.

Flight Mechanic "C" Decosta and I deadheaded to Sam Tong on Bird Dornier 22 Golf to replace Mike Marshall and Punz and fly Hotel-23. Mike had RON at Paksane the previous night but, not being a greedy individual, I did not have to wait long for him to relocate to my position. Except for one inspection when Lou McCasland was flying, the ship remained in the field without maintenance problems and had about forty hours remaining until another mandatory hundred hour inspection. I liked to know who had flown the ship just before me, as it provided me with some near-term maintenance history, knowledge of the prior pilot's experience level, and the fact that I could access his probable care of the machine. This was especially important to me, since a quick turnaround was the norm expected by an Operations Department who pressured maintenance personnel to return the ships to the field ASAP.

Activity in Military Region Two was almost the same as when I left on leave. Now two primary areas of concern--consolidation of gains in the Moung Soui area, and the retaking of Tha Thom--were focal points of helicopter work. Although initially working east at Pha Phai (LS-65) to help pressure the enemy around Tha Vieng, most of my daily work involved shuttling troops and supplies from Long Tieng and Moung Soui to the Phou Soung hills around Route-7 and the Sala Phou Khoun road junction. In my absence, a few pads had been improved and new ones developed. Because of heavy loads and swirling winds whipping around the hillsides, the work was challenging and required close attention to all approaches.

There were some changes at Long Tieng. To accommodate the increased number of personnel remaining overnight, Bird and Son paid to erect a sizeable thatched crew house on a hill near the west gap of the valley. For some reason, it was painted blue and assumed an appropriate name: the Blue House. To facilitate the

enormous workload that developed in Military Region Two without ferrying each day from Wattay Airport to Long Tieng and back at night, a Bird Dornier and Triple-Tailed Pioneer pilot frequently RON in the Blue House. Moreover, as already mentioned, Lloyd Zimmerman and his Porter bombing machine RON. Similar to Pop Buell's preference for the Helio Courier, costing a lowly 150 dollars per hour to operate, the ugly Pioneer was also relatively inexpensive to operate. Although slow, it could carry larger loads. Eldon Walker normally flew the Pioneer, either landing at remote sites, or air dropping supplies from the enormous cabin section. Bird pilots like Jim McFarland (formerly an Air America Beaver pilot) and Dick Douglas were cross-trained and flew both the Dornier and Pioneer when Eldon was on STO. A sophisticated radio network had not been fully developed at Long Tieng because of political reasons. Therefore, Bird Dorniers, not well suited for supply work, were mainly employed to recon an area and collect radio intelligence from various remote outposts. ⁶

Since there was normally extra room and we generally had several helicopter crews overnighiting at Site-20A (others stayed at Sam Tong), we were later invited to bunk in the Blue House squad bay type room. Initially, because of the distance from the Operations-Administration shack, and the amount of gear we normally carried for a hike up the hill, the invitation was rarely accepted. Moreover, the lack of visible guards, the isolation, and the potential for a mortar attack also worried us. Even Terry Burke, after staying there a short time, did not feel safe and returned to his sleeping arrangement in a former rice warehouse close to the operations shed. ⁷

⁶ Blaine Jensen Letter, 07/01/96.

⁷ Terry Burke Email, 02/27/04, 03/01/04.

The Long Tieng food fund was still active. Its continuance was probably a positive idea, for miserly Air America management in Taipei, claiming the monthly Provisional Allowance was sufficient for our needs, refused to provide us separate upcountry per diem. The small amount of money contributed to the fund tended to reduce the need for crewmembers to carry extra food necessary for the expanding RONs.

In my absence, Lou McCasland had spent 350 of the 500 baht I transferred to him for Long Tieng provisions. Except for milk and Ovaltine, the delivery covered mostly paper products. In addition to erecting a crew house, Bird increasingly assumed responsibility for food shipments to Site-20A. I do not know exactly what transpired between Tony and Bird while I was on leave, but suspect that because of a lack of necessary items in our poorly stocked Udorn store, Bird pilots shipped 200 hundred dollars of embassy commissary food to Long Tieng. Since both companies participated in the Long Tieng operation, Air America helicopter crews to a much greater degree, Bird representative Jim McFarland and I decided that Air America pilots would pay seventy percent of the bill. Therefore, as McFarland flew the Pioneer out of the site and I frequently conversed with him during fueling stops, I began providing Jim checks as part payments to satisfy our accrued bill. We agreed that I would continue to pay the houseboy's wages and supplement items Bird could not provide.

The increased number of our flight personnel who worked and RON at Long Tieng in August, and the debt incurred to Bird, necessitated that we increase the voluntary monthly sum for the food fund to two hundred baht (ten dollars) per month for Captains. American Flight Mechanics electing to participate

would pay the same amount as Captains. Because their earnings were considerably less, Filipino Flight Mechanics were only charged a hundred baht. The sums were realistic, so, no one complained.

During September 1964, our helicopter program consisted of nineteen active pilots--sixteen Captains and three First Officers. Not all were available upcountry, so during the month, I collected money at both Long Tieng and Udorn. Included were: Sam Jordon, Lou McCasland, Julian Kanach, Howard Estes, Charlie Weitz, Wayne Knight, Don Buxton, Marius Burke, Tom Moher, Jack Connor, and the Author. First Officers included Bob Nunez and Phil Goddard. Absent, but later contributing, were Art White, Mike Marshall, Dick Elder, Steve Stevens, Ed Reid, and First Officer Porter Hough (yes, old Porter was still with us and contributed three dollars in early October). Flight Mechanics contributing were: Joe Marlin, Lazaro, Stan Wilson, "Blacky" Mondello, Ben Sabino, Punzalan, and representing a younger, new generation Filipinos, Joe Siaotong. Customers Vint Lawrence and Terry Burke, realizing value in the fund, also contributed.

Pilot-Customer rapport was still considered excellent at Long Tieng, but, with increased personnel getting in the way, not quite as well developed as before. Vint remained the taciturn intellectual type, and when not eating at General Vang Pao's long house, did not remain long for idle chit-chat after dinner in the hooch. Tony continued to entertain us with his antics and kept us abreast of the military situation. Although we enjoyed a net territorial gain for the year, he was impatient with the slow progress returning Tha Thom to RLG control. Additionally, the old "War Horse" retained his several biases and continuously railed about U.S. Embassy and State's views on Lao neutrality. Because of Unger's perceived sluggishness in

reacting to past SARs, and reluctance to expand the air war, the ambassador was not a favorite of our mentor or of us pilots.

Diplomat William Sullivan was scheduled to replace Ambassador Leonard Unger in November. Tony was elated. He optimistically expected the war to heat up and USG would allow us to proceed with aggressive operations. I wondered if this optimism might be premature, for it seemed to parallel his same enthusiasm fostered by LBJ's entrance to the White House. We would have to wait and see what developed.

WHAT THE HELL?

Toward the end of the rainy season, many nights were cloudless, with visibility unlimited (CAVU). One cool evening, following several beers and dinner, we walked out the hooch to relax and inhale the wonderfully pure mountain air. Although not a ritual, this was not unusual, and we had previously viewed one of the Echo satellites still aloft crossing the sky one night. This particular time, the sky was clear and chock full of bright stars twinkling against the universe's intense dark backdrop. It reminded me of watching "shooting stars" on a remote beach at night in North Carolina with a favorite girlfriend.

Since bombing had commenced in Military Region Two, we anticipated some form of enemy retaliation, likely at night when all friendly air was on the ground. Against this supposition, we frequently scanned the horizon over the hills south of the valley. Suddenly, Tony spotted the position lights of an aircraft flying toward us from the south. It could only be an enemy plane approaching with grave implications for our valley fortress. Moving downhill away from light shining through the open door, Tony shouted over his shoulder for Macorn to have the houseboy bring his binoculars. Then we focused on the unidentified bogey, which did appear to be flying toward our

bowl. Red alert! Red alert! The entire complexion of our lighthearted banter changed. Shouts and orders were followed by a frenzied hubbub of activity. People dashed toward the runway to remove a heavy canvas covering a mounted .50 caliber machine gun, strategically positioned to deal with such contingencies. With the gun manned and loaded, we observed the plane for several minutes through the glasses. The situation was perplexing, for strangely, the plane appeared to be moving, but not getting any closer.

Finally, it dawned on us we had been deceived by our imperfect human sense of sight. The object was not a plane at all, only a brilliant distant star, twinkling white, red, and green in the pristine atmosphere. We had been fooled by red and green blinking lights corresponding to the position lights of port and starboard sides of an inbound aircraft. Furthermore, continuously staring at the star had triggered a phi-phenomenon condition I had learned about in school, whereby human eyes and the brain falsely perceive a fixed object as moving. I quickly explained this to the small group. The collective effect of beer, apprehension of a potential enemy attack, and the physical anomaly had combined to create a comedy of errors. With the confusion over, we roared with boisterous laughter, and sheepishly retired.

HOWIE GOES AIRBORNE

Late in the day on Saturday, while I was supporting the Phou Soung area, C-123 kicker "Howie" Baker was killed during a freak accident at Long Tieng. Before Air America employment, Baker had served in Military Region Four at Saravane with the U.S. Army White Star Special Forces operation. During the late summer of 1962, Mike Marshall recalled working with Captain Sullivan, Sergeant Smith, Baker, and other team members. They

conducted operations with tribals at the Houie Kong site on the Bolovens Plateau and other area villages. After the 1962 Geneva Accords signing, Special Forces anticipated scrapping Bull Simons' Kha training program and subsequent withdrawal from the country. Therefore, aware that the communists would never leave the country alone, Mike helped the team bury a cache of M-1 rifles and carbines about three miles northeast of the Site-44 airstrip, against the day of their anticipated return. During this process, he liberated both a carbine and an M-1 rifle, and posted them to a friend in Houston, Texas, for safekeeping. It was the last time he saw the weapons.

Mike RON three nights at the team's rough quarters in town. Several huts stood close together, with a tarpaulin-covered shower located outside. While showering, local female talent frequently passed the camp offering oral sex through the fence for 500 kip (one dollar U.S.).

To pass the time, the men were playful and creative. They kept a sex-crazed monkey, "Horney," tied to a ridgepole. To obtain a laugh, they threw a Raggedy Ann doll to the pet. The animal would then proceed to attempt intercourse with the inanimate object. Then, as a further means of cruel, perverted enjoyment, just before achieving orgasm, someone cruelly snatched the object of his affection away, causing the monkey extreme anxiety. ⁸

The grass airstrip at Long Tieng was relatively short, rough, and unable to safely accommodate anything heavier or larger than STOL Caribou or Pioneer aircraft. A combination of monsoon winds, rain, and a narrow valley created dangerous flying conditions for even these larger planes. In addition, a subterranean river flowed south beneath the strip from the

⁸ Mike Marshall Written Reply to the Author's 09/14/92 Questions. Mike Marshall Emails, 08/25/99, 08/26/99.

northern hills during the rainy season. At times, following landing and rollout, the Pioneer's huge fixed landing gear sank into the soft soil, with tires and oleos disappearing into the abyss. The Triple-Tail aircraft was sturdily built, and mechanics always managed to jack the relatively undamaged plane up sufficiently, then extract and clean it to fly another day.

Because of these early deficiencies, C-46 and C-47s initially airdropped or parachuted fuel, rice, "hard rice," and other supplies to a sloped clearing on the northeastern portion of the valley well away from the strip, warehouse, and populated areas. However, pilots of the large planes were limited in their ability to maneuver and adequately use marginal engine power inside the valley bowl. Moreover, all recalled the Forte-Sarno tragedy at Pha Khao years before. Therefore, C-123 Providers, more adept and suited for the job, were employed to participate in the air supply. Equipped with more powerful engines than a Caribou, a C-47, or a C-46, C-123s could safely descend lower than other planes. Employing an open aft ramp, loads could quickly be discharged, and more accurately delivered to the drop zone. Well-coordinated techniques were developed by trial and error, whereby pilots approached from the southeast, cleared the ridgeline, and dove into the valley, while kickers rolled one to two heavily loaded plywood pallets off wheeled tracks and out the open ramp. With the load discharged, to preclude striking high karsts to the west, the pilot "poured the coal" to the engines, pulled back violently on the yoke to climb out of harm's way, and then forcefully leveled off to avoid penetrating inevitable low-lying cloud layers. The process was repeated until there was no more cargo. It was a fascinating and extremely noisy maneuver to observe and hear from the ground.

The abrupt pull-up and pushover invariably created negative gravity or "G" forces. ⁹

On 12 September, during such a maneuver flown by Captain Crews, Howard Baker, unrestrained by a safety strap, floated off the deck and out the rear aperture, plunging several hundred feet to his death. ¹⁰

According to the second kicker's eyewitness report, when Crews conducted the negative "G" maneuver, Baker began his weightless flight to eternity. Kicking and screaming, he fruitlessly attempted to grab the overhead wire static line strung the length of the fuselage. While Baker slowly drifted toward the tail opposite the plane's forward movement, the kicker in the rear of the ship attempted to grasp his arm. He was nearly successful, as evidenced by the deep nail scratches on his arm. Sadly, Baker sailed out into the rarified mountain air, never attaining terminal velocity before smashing into the ground. One can only speculate what flashed through Baker's terror-stricken mind during those last few moments of his life.

Despite being at an 800-foot altitude above ground level (AGL), "Howie" might possibly have survived had he been wearing a parachute or been secured by a gunner's belt to the overhead static line. However, contrary to existing Company policy, he had failed to take proper precautions. Observing him chute-less with the ramp open several times, superiors Mike Ladue and Frank Janke had previously warned him against this reckless behavior.

⁹ The Author first experienced the weightless phenomenon while flying a T-34 training plane at NAS Pensacola. It became such great fun that when returning solo from outlying practice fields, I regularly placed a pencil on the cockpit deck and cinched my shoulder harness and lap belt tight so that I could hardly breathe. Then I placed the plane into a steep climb angle, gently pushed the nose over, and caught the pencil as it floated past my nose. I never tired of this form of entertainment.

¹⁰ Tom Crews was a classmate of Wayne Knight during Pensacola flight training.

From the drop zone's perimeter, Terry Burke watched the final pallet's ejection and the chutes quickly deploying to cushion the landing. During the ensuing horror, he observed and heard unearthly screams from a human flailing wildly through the air after leaving the rear of the aircraft. While Terry charged a hundred feet east at high port, Baker hit, bounced, and then lay flat. First to reach the body, Burke observed what appeared like blood seeping from every pore of Baker's broken body. Burke did not sleep well that night. ¹¹

Mike LaDue was in Washington when he received a call from George Doole's office requesting that he and a former Air Freight Specialist (AFS) represent Air America at Baker's funeral in Newport, Rhode Island. They spent three rain filled days honoring this obligation.

MIKE LADUE'S AEROBATICS

During the previous two years, Air America kicker Mike LaDue, unlike Baker, had survived two incidents "accidentally" falling out of drop aircraft.

In 1956, Mike received basic parachute training with the 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and honed his skills with the Army Special Forces in Germany. After serving an obligated three-year service tour, he attended three years of college until March 1962, at which time the bored student joined Air America. After arriving in Vientiane, he became a kicker, and eventually the Co-Chief of Aerial Delivery and Search and Rescue. He held this position until August 1964, when he elected to return to the University of Maryland and pursue a degree in something less dangerous and more useful.

¹¹ Terry Burke, Emails, 03/01/07; 03/04/07; 03/06/07.
EW Knight Email, 07/02/00.

Mike's first unscheduled jump from a "perfectly good airplane" occurred on 12 July 1963 during a C-123 rice drop flown by Don Campbell and Al Wilson over Ban Pha En, located south of Sam Tong and four miles northwest of Site-37. The small village and helicopter pad were located in foothills close to the sprawling Phou Miang range.

Turbulent conditions prevailed during the drop and, as Mike cut the load loose to roll off the tracks, a vicious downdraft caused the kicker to suddenly be lifted off his feet and swept out the ramp door. Since he departed the plane with the head set still attached to his head, Campbell was unaware of LaDue's plight until turning to see why he was not closing the ramp door.

Mike's B-9 chute deployed properly. He landed in thick brush near the summit of a small hill that was part of a larger mountain. Unhurt, he scooped up the parachute and began walking toward an area of the suspected drop village. He soon encountered small soldiers wearing U.S. Army style fatigues carrying large rifles. They escorted him to Ban Pha En, where the men helped spread the parachute on the H-34 landing pad for the C-123 crew to see.

Within an hour, a Helio Courier pilot began low passes over the landing zone. After a time, it became obvious that he intended to land on the short pad.¹² LaDue cleared villagers off the area, and, attesting to the plane's superior STOL characteristics in the hands of a proficient pilot, Captain Ed Dearborn landed B-843.

¹² Because of Geneva Accords protocols and politics of the time, few if any UD-34Ds were assigned to work Military Region Two in 1962.



Two UH-34D crews passing Site-37 south of The Alternate and Sam Tong. Meo slash and burn agriculture evident on the mountainside.

Author Collection.

Ed was not without a viable takeoff plan. Since the landing zone was located on the edge of a cliff, he arranged to have the villagers dismantle two houses to increase his takeoff roll. Dearborn then attached a portion of Mike's pilot chute canopy to another house as a windsock. Next, he drained sufficient fuel calculated to appreciably lighten the ship, and all hands helped roll it back from the cliff's lip.

They waited until evening for the anticipated cooler, denser air that would enhance lift. Finally, after goodbyes, the two men entered the cockpit. Ed cranked up the engine and they launched. Reaching the end of the cliff, just short of minimum flying speed, Ed dove off the lip, trading altitude for increased lift and proper airspeed.

The flight to Wattay Airport was uneventful and they rolled into the parking area in time for dinner.

LaDue's second unscheduled plunge from an aircraft occurred in 1964. Although achieving a successful outcome, it was not as innocuous as his first accidental fall. This time he was flying as flight specialist (AFS) with Captain Ed Echoldt in one of the two Company Caribous. Planning to airdrop, they left Wattay Airport with a load of fuel drums for Pha Khao before continuing on to Sam Tong to work for Pop Buell. The load could have been landed, but Operations believed air dropping the load was more efficient, saving both time and money.

Patches of morning fog hung low over parts of the restricted valley. Therefore, care would have to be exercised around protruding karsts, similar to those at Pha Khao that had taken the lives of the C-46 Forte crew in 1961.

Ed wormed his way down into the drop area, attempting to maintain clearance from the adverse weather. Then, on the drop pass, as LaDue was about to cut the drums loose, the plane



A 35mm Minox photograph of Ed Dearborn's Helio Courier, B-843 on the Ban Pha En helipad.

LaDue Collection.



Captain Dearborn holding a Meo boy while he attaches part of Mike LaDue's parachute to a roof for a windsock in the village of Ban Pha En.

LaDue Collection.

suddenly entered a fog bank. When Eckholdt exited the mist, he saw a large barrier looming large in the windscreen. While Ed racked the aircraft into a tight left turn to avoid the obstacle, Mike was thrown violently against the cargo doorframe and was propelled out the rear ramp with the drums. Barely conscious, he did not recall pulling the ripcord on the converted chest parachute.

When LaDue became aware of what was happening around him, he was on his back on the 2,000 foot runway. A young Meo medic, who must have recently graduated from training, was attempting to drown him by pouring a quart can of medicinal alcohol on his gashed and bleeding head. After villagers dragged him from the strip, Ed landed and Mike was loaded. Following the trip to Vientiane, he was taken to the embassy doctor, who crudely stitched together the torn skin on his head.

Because of the extent of his head injuries, suspected of incurring a concussion, Company officials ordered LaDue to Taipei for a thorough examination by Chinese doctors at the Chinese Soldiers Hospital. For an afternoon, he was surrounded and probed by medicos. That evening Mike called the Prince Hotel and asked that one of the bus boys he was helping through school, hire a cab to extricate and take him out for some entertainment.

The boy arrived and shepherded Mike to the Literary Inn at Peitou in the hills overlooking the city. He had previously heard about the sensual pleasures of Peitou establishments from other Air America crewmembers. However, he was amazed by the Inn's appointments. The establishment's fine wood interior was spotless, and sported an overwhelming assortment of young ladies. All were ready and willing to gently bathe a customer in the room's hot tubs and proceed with the business at hand. Food and drinks were outstanding, and Mike spent most of the night

obtaining a different and considerably more enjoyable therapy than envisioned by the Chinese doctors.

The kid returned with a taxi following his shift at the hotel, and was quite annoyed when Mike was not willing to leave the pleasure palace. He managed to sneak his charge back into the hospital shortly before dawn, but the doctors must have been suspicious of his AWOL activities and wanted him out of their presence. Therefore, he was provided with a clean bill of health and discharged. The next day, Mike was on the Mandarin jet, pampered and sated with scotch, and anxious to return to work.

LaDue remained with Air America, flying many regular and special drop missions. He trained Thai and Lao youngsters to perform the work and participated in several SAR missions. ¹³ ¹⁴

AAM MAINTAINCE

In addition to increased H-34 flight time, the expanding war in Laos created other maintenance work for Air America. With the inception of lucrative T-28 repair contracts, Udorn's growing maintenance facility was tasked to rebuild battle damaged and crashed aircraft, with talented third-country sheet-metal personnel hired to perform the specialized work. Along with continuing hangar expansion, Udorn Maintenance Department

¹³ The Author was under the assumption that Mike LaDue, suspected of jumping and not accidentally falling from planes, was terminated. In defense, Mike stated that he was a licensed skydiver and performed two free falls upcountry with his own equipment. One was at Long Tieng that brought Vang Pao out of his house to watch. Another was over Sam Tong, where a last minute wind gust caused him to veer and nearly land on Doctor Weldon, who was conducting his first visit to meet and talk with Pop Buell. "Jiggs" later told Mike that it really gave him a start when a body dropped from the sky and hit the ground next to him.

¹⁴ Mike LaDue, Emails, 02/21/10, 02/22/10, 03/19/10, 03/22/10. Mike Ladue Letter, 03/01/10. Ed Dearborn Email, 03/1010.

supervisors confidently believed that the department possessed sufficient tools, jigs, and experience to accomplish a complete UH-34D rebuild. Much of this decision stemmed from the shoddy IRAN work long performed in Saigon by an inept contract maintenance company. Indeed, when an overhauled ship was eventually repatriated to Udorn, a detailed inspection normally revealed it unacceptable for upcountry operation, requiring the ship to be inspected and torn down again for repairs.

For various reasons, most relating to pilot inexperience, enemy presence in 1961, and the lack of adequate recovery capability, many H-34 fuselages rotted in the jungle. After the recent FAR victory, large areas in Laos once again became available to search for, and recover, scarce helicopter parts for later disposition. Against this end, over time, many crashed helicopters were identified, and the locations plotted for investigation and possible recovery.

MY BOO-BOO

During early afternoon, a Udorn maintenance team arrived at Long Tieng to assess and, if deemed feasible, remove an H-34 tub (the forward section that contained a recess for the engine) from an old hulk in the rugged hills west of Xieng Dat. I was assigned to drop the team off in a small clearing, where they could walk to the wreck's location. The Filipinos were equipped with ground-air radio capability, and in case they experienced trouble and required extraction, I would be working about twelve miles away in the Moung Soui area.

The rolling hills south of Moung Soui strip were littered with boxes of airdropped ammunition. Most nylon parachutes, a precious commodity because of their value as tents and other uses, had already been collected. However, expecting others to do their bidding, no attempt by the lazy Neutralists had yet

been conducted to recover the various ordnance. Coordinating with a Requirements Office (RO) representative, I moved troops to the area and began shuttles to the munitions dump beside the runway.

After several trips, I had not heard from the recovery team. Late in the afternoon, about time to return to Long Tieng, I began a takeoff up slope with a moderate load. Not paying close attention, I brushed a low, lone tree and dinged the rotor caps. Hitting the only tree in the area (what I later referred to as the only tree on the Plain of Jars), I could not believe what I had done. Granted, I had flown over ten hours that day and was still jet lag challenged, but that could only constitute a rationalization for my stupid mistake. I shut down, had "C" remove the caps, and called the men working to my south. Then, with the blades whistling like banshees, I recovered the team, flew to The Alternate, and requested a set of rotor caps.

The caps arrived early Sunday morning. After "C" installed them while standing on top of the tail cone, I flew a couple of fuel loads and returned the aircraft to Udorn for scheduled maintenance.

Since annual leave had placed me well behind other helicopter pilots' average monthly flight time, I was immediately scheduled to return upcountry with First Officer Bobby Nunez, and was advised to prepare for a long RON.

Sang had still not returned to Sopa Villa, but I managed to discover through my maid and a translator that during my absence in America, she had experienced recurring problems with her ovaries, which required medical help by Bangkok doctors. Slightly relieved at this explanation, I assumed that she had sold my radios and typewriter to pay for doctor bills.

Following four days in the field, I had few clean uniforms left to wear for an extensive RON. When the sets of distinctive prison gray garb were officially mandated and tailored in Udorn, we rarely worked long periods in Laos and only short RONs were contemplated at the time. Moreover, old RON sites, such as the one at Luang Prabang, had facilities to launder clothes. Within the convoluted world of Air America Company aviation, there was a great disparity between work requirements and creature comforts of fixed wing and helicopter pilots, particularly in billeting procedures. Unfortunately, as field pilots, the very nature of our work placed us at the bottom of the pit with little chance to climb out. According to the Company Personnel Manual, Captains were entitled to a single room while at out stations, which pre-assumed overnighting in a semi-civilized area, where laundry services might be available. The policy was good in theory, as it enabled a PIC the opportunity to purchase decent food and obtain a restful night's sleep. However, in practice, except at larger Lao river towns, such amenities were rarely available to rotor heads. Even then, we were seldom at a

site long enough to have soiled clothes washed and dried. Nevertheless, neither Army pilots nor we mud Marines overtly complained. It would have done no good anyway, so we simply accepted the fact that the unpleasant conditions we endured were part of the job description. With this in mind, I packed what clean uniforms remained, along with clean underwear, in my black overnight bag.

Following a lonely night at Sopa Villa without female companionship to wish me luck and speed me on my way upcountry, about mid-morning the Thai B-Bus driver honked impatiently to deliver me to the field to standby. I patted faithful Caesar on the head and tossed my goods into the truck.

Turning left onto the Tahan Tanon highway, we drove south a couple of stones throw from Soi Wat Po to Soi Mahamet, located in a dirt alley. There, amid banana trees, dogs, and kids, we turned left again, entered a small compound, and stopped in front of a small bungalow to collect Bob Nunez and his gear. Tom and Kathy Moher lived in the first screened bungalow. Nunez and Marius Burke shared the adjacent house.

Aware that unless invited to dine at Vang Pao's house, we would not enjoy an abundance of food upcountry, we consumed a large lunch at the Club. Then I walked to the Company supermarket and purchased a few canned goods to carry as emergency rations, and nineteen rolls of toilet paper and paper towels for the hooch food fund.

After ground mechanics rolled Hotel-23 out of the hangar, Wayne and Joe Siaotong tested the machine for an obligatory thirty-five minutes, and then released it to me as being airworthy. I walked Bobby through a detailed preflight and answered any questions he posed. The policy of allowing a PIC to further assess a machine just out of inspection was still in effect.

After fine-tuning Hotel-23 to my satisfaction, Nunez, Punzalan, and I flew to Long Tieng via Wattay Airport. As we arrived at Long Tieng late, there was only time for a couple of short runs.

Punzalan was an older Filipino who rarely said much, and accepted life as it was. Like others of his generation, he was visibly upset over "Pappy" Pascual's death during the Zeitler shootdown, but, supporting a large family on Luzon Island, he needed the extra money earned from crewing helicopters. Although Filipino third country nationals received only a fraction of the salary their American counterparts earned, when dollars were converted into pesos the overall amount was substantial, especially now that we were flying maximum hours.

Punz was a nice person, but such a characteristic was not always desirable in a Flight Mechanic when loading aggressive passengers at sites where tribal folks might take advantage of him and overload the helicopter. Punz was a little timid, particularly when concerned that someone might shoot him, so he often allowed an unruly mob unrestricted access to the helicopter.

From the standpoint of safety, and wear and tear on the H-34, it was essential that a pilot have a reasonably accurate estimate of cabin payload before takeoff. Since we possessed no scales, unless an object's weight was marked by a stencil, it was often difficult, if not impossible, to judge an exact gross load. This was especially a problem with people and their goods, and could often only be resolved by a time-consuming hover check. If a hover indicated too much weight, the pilot had to land and the Flight Mechanic discharge whatever was necessary to get airborne. Obstinate passengers, reluctant to lose their

ride, sometimes caused problems and delayed flight operations. For this reason, it was better to load the helicopter properly the first time.

Occasionally, after observing chaos occurring at the cabin door, I became frustrated with the refugees' or locals' lack of discipline, and a Flight Mechanic's inability to control them. Therefore, during such occasions, I angrily shouted at the Flight Mechanic that if he could not control who and what got on my ship, then I would shut down and do it myself. I did this more than once. Then, while searching for a "Red Beret" lieutenant or other leader to assume control over the rabble, I harangued both the Flight Mechanic and crowd.

As time passed, and the Meo became more familiar with our helicopters and small fixed wing aircraft, they preferred to ride and not walk long distances. This certainly must have been related to human nature's proclivity to avoid pain, but after some observation, we suspected that a flourishing trade selling rides was developing at Long Tieng.

The problem continued for years, but was somewhat resolved at The Alternate when I appealed to Vint for help one day. He instantly took charge, and with a stern face and help from indigenous personnel, bodily-ejected people from my overloaded machine. I was eternally grateful for his assistance. Thereafter, the situation was somewhat alleviated after he helped train loadmasters.

An amusing anecdote later occurred while loading a helicopter at an outlying site. The H-34 was almost full when Vang Pao asked the USIS representative and pilot for a ride. His request was granted, but while attempting to hover, the pilot determined that the ship was too heavy, and instructed a new American Flight Mechanic to lighten the load. For reasons of his own, the general was not wearing insignia that day.

Consequently, the Flight Mechanic, having no idea who he was, ejected him from the cabin. Later, when the PIC inquired over ICS how the general was doing, the Flight Mechanic curiously replied, *"What general?"*

Vang Pao eventually returned to Long Tieng where the USIS man apologized profusely for the error. The general, realistic and ever patient with his foreign charges, allowed that the Flight Mechanic was new and did not know him. That was the last said regarding the episode.

I had not flown with Nunez since early August, right after he arrived in Udorn, and I was interested in evaluating his progress. Hoping to spare him the same pain associated with my learning experiences, I intended to teach him in stages all I had learned about mountain flying over the past two years. First, I would demonstrate my techniques, then, after talking him through a maneuver, allow him to perform from the left seat. In this way, he might obtain a cross section of our non-standardized flight operations, and develop his own mountain techniques. The onus was on us to teach a newbie, but of course, the job always came first, so any instructing depended on the current situation and safety considerations. Because of his lack of upcountry and H-34 experience, and Charlie Weitz's mandate, I was not ready to let him sit in the right seat until after I had assessed his performance. I explained all this to Bobby, who replied with what would become an often-echoed and somewhat trite statement from new pilots and Customers alike, *that he "would not argue with success."*

I also knew that since we were double crewed, we were marked, at any time subject to selection by Vientiane Oscar Mikes for SAR duty ahead of single crewed ships. Directly following Billy Zeitler's downing and enhanced SAR SOPs, there was a preference to assign ships containing two pilots for

standby and actual missions. Despite the requirement, the few pilots in our pool did not yet permit this luxury, nor did we look forward to such a situation.

PHU PHA THI

Early on the 15th, we conducted a couple of missions to the east of The Alternate. After refueling, we were loaded for Ban Hua Mung. While working at Site-58, Bobby experienced a respectable taste of the northern Sam Neua region still controlled by government forces, when we were redirected about sixteen miles north to Phu Pa Thi (Lima Site-85) with a load of ammunition.

As RLG's tentacles began to extend deeper into Sam Neua Province, courtesy of past associations with Meo disenchanted with communist rule, Site-85's importance was reestablished and enhanced as a focal point for northern activity there, and at a small network of short Helio Courier strips south and west of Sam Neua town (L-04).

Seen from a great distance in good weather, Pha Thi resembled a huge, isolated block of limestone rock karst, prominently jutting over 5,800 feet above sea level (ASL) into the air from lush, narrow river valleys. Strategically located twenty two nautical miles west of Lima-04, and within eleven miles of the North Vietnamese border, the altitude and commanding terrain afforded PARU teams the capability to intercept and monitor enemy radio transmissions and visually scan areas to the east. During the First Indochina War, French commandos and Meo Marquis utilized the site to excellent advantage. Now, held by Meo and PARU radio operators and advisors, it was again used with the additional mission to gather ground intelligence, and as a springboard to harass enemy supply lines.



Lima Site 85 strip at lower left and sprawling Meo village at Phu Pha Thi, Laos.

John Tarn Collection.

The grass landing strip and village at the 4,500-foot level were located over 1,000-feet below the summit. Perched on a southeast finger, the strip's angle was highly deceptive from the air, sloped up at a very steep incline toward the mountain's core. Because of Pha Thi's remoteness and inaccessibility, most supplies were air dropped to the site's inhabitants by C-46 cargo planes. Before we received additional H-34s, the Customer used Helio Couriers to maintain contact with the leaders there. I had been to Pha Thi twice previously, once with Vint Lawrence to deliver goods. I did not particularly enjoy the prolonged descent and landing to the windy slope. However, the ability to conduct a roll-on landing minimized problems of any misjudgment of wind direction.

As a portion of the ville was located uphill in defilade beyond the top of the strip, few people were normally present to offload cargo and direct missions, but those that appeared seemed motivated and competent.

Missions there were varied and very challenging. Troops were in the very early stages of manning or developing outposts about five miles to the east across the Nam Yut divide. The high mountainous area described a semicircular defense line on the reverse slopes of Phou Houay Hao and Ban Den Din. Consisting of hacked out dirt shelves in defilade on the west side, none of the new landing zones were capable of extensive improvement. As there were no windsocks, visible wind direction and velocity were always difficult and sometimes impossible to judge. We carried no smoke grenades, and blowing grass, bushes, tree leaves, or rising smoke rarely helped. In addition, variable wind direction was almost invariably adverse for landings, and strong downdrafts prevailed over the lip of the hills. In such cases, using successful techniques developed over the years in the Khang Kho and Phu Khe areas, I established a flat power-on

approach at a forty five degree angle to a point, while judging my rate of closure and assessing the direction and degree of wind. If observed ground speed exceeded indicated instrument airspeed, I was aware that a tail wind adversely affected the machine, and took appropriate action before decelerating below translational lift. Observing a satisfactory rate of closure, with sufficient power and an adequate reserve available, particularly while carrying passengers, I might elect to land. Even taking these precautions into consideration, there were still some anxious, hairy moments during landings.

If all safe parameters were not apparent, I preferred to airdrop rice and items not easily damaged from a low altitude. In this case, the Flight Mechanic stacked rice sacks or ammunition close to the open cabin door. Then, at my command, he discharged the load over the landing zone during a slow flyby. With proper crew coordination and pilot due diligence, the method proved safe and effective. The process required far less power, and eliminated the wear and tear on the machine that a downwind approach and possible hard landing could exact. It also alleviated doubt and the stressful tension such an approach fostered.

Another interesting, but time consuming mission at Pha Thi involved hauling water from the Yut River, more than 1,500 feet below the strip. Water for those living on a mountain was rarely a problem during the rainy season. At most mountain locations, troops and villagers could tap the abundant runoff cascading down hillsides, rig ponchos over containers, or catch rooftop rain in empty fuel barrels. However, during the peak of the dry season, water became a scarce commodity at altitude, and had to be hauled from miles away by tiny mountain ponies or human labor (always females).

Adequate water was available year round here, but it was located far below in the Yut River. When water missions from Pha Thi first commenced, to save time descending, I autorotated at up to 1,500-feet per minute to the riverbed, where men busily filled surplus fuel drums. (Absolutely nothing was wasted in the mountains.) There, depending on the fuel state, two to three drums were strapped and hoisted aboard, and I spent several minutes retracing altitude to the strip. The yo-yo supply operation was fun and enlightening. The process afforded me an excellent view of the huge mountain mass, the sheer sides constituting the north face, and an appreciation for the defense it provided. It certainly appeared to me that the Meo redoubt had been well selected and was virtually impregnable.

Bobby and I certainly did not perform all I mentioned during our time at the site. Much of that would be reserved for future months and years. As fuel was not yet staged at Pha Thi, we returned to Houa Moug to work until requiring fuel for a return trip to Long Tieng.

At the time, we were rarely informed of any scheduled U.S. military airstrikes or armed reconnaissance in progress, so, although available to respond to a Mayday call, I was rarely aware of any SAR requirement. As was Colonel Tong's custom, his batman, the "Coffee Man," an unofficial greeter and harbinger of good tidings, met us with liquid refreshment. I noticed a distinct change in his appearance from my last trip. Several World War Two pineapple type grenades hung loosely from his web belt. So many explosives in the hands of this obviously mentally challenged individual seemed like overkill, and extremely dangerous to me. Furthermore, he did not even have a rubber band or tape covering the spoons for redundant safety. I was unaware of any danger lurking nearby requiring such armament, and as he swished around, I considered the person a disaster waiting to

happen. Grenades could be extremely lethal in the hands of careless soldiers. We constantly worried about relatively unsophisticated youngsters carrying them in our helicopters. In my mind, "The Coffee Man" had spun downhill from just being a poor devil to the village idiot of Site-58.

Van Pao's forces continued moving east and south of Padong Ridge in support of FAR offensive efforts to regain control of the Tha Thom Valley. As Route-4 was still active, emphasis was stressed on fortifying and supplying high outposts in and around Sites-65 and 21, two positions that bracketed the two main enemy LOCs. In addition, to enhance interdiction and contain enemy units in Xieng Khouang Ville area, new landing zones were being developed on the southwest slopes of towering Phou Sao. After inquiring as to the dimensions required for H-34s to land, Vint attempted to instruct the troops on how to construct a pad to our helicopter's specifications. Despite their efforts, most of the high pads posed a distinct landing challenge, and were barely or just large enough to accommodate a helicopter. The work was definitely not tailored for a novice pilot, so I conducted most of the landings, while hoping that Bobby would understand the problems involved and learn.

Continuing what Billy Z was working on the morning of his shoot down, there was also a push to increase a friendly presence in the Moung Oum (LS-22) Valley northeast of Moung Cha (LS-113) and in the hills overlooking Ban Tha Vieng, in preparation for the conquest of the site. In addition, the enemy had not been completely ejected from areas east of Moung Oum and Khieu Manang, and their elimination constituted part of the overall plan for the region. Since there were useable strips at both sites, the area was much easier to work.

THE PRISONER

During our last refueling stop at Long Tieng, a celebration of sorts was taking place. Two Vietnamese soldiers had been captured near Tha Thom and one was flown to The Alternate for interrogation and display.

Since February, Washington had been clamoring for the capture of a live Vietnamese prisoner, who could attest to Vietnamese Army presence and Geneva Accords violations in Laos. It was something the Meo who had been fighting them knew very well, and needed no proof.

When the prisoner first arrived, Terry Burke, thinking he looked an unimpressive sixteen years old, snapped a picture of him in front of the Operations shack. Small and slim, he wore neither shoes nor hat. His fatigues were filthy, with a shoulder ripped off one side of his shirt. A rope encircled his neck and arms in the usual manner, and his hands were tied in front. As there were significant language problems, first attempts to question him proved useless.

Tony Poe almost destroyed the capability to exploit the situation. Tony had been drinking heavily in his hooch on the south side of the runway. Learning of the new arrival, he charged to the location screaming about killing the blank-blank bastard. Then he jumped on the kid and began throttling him. Terry panicked, thinking of all the energy and money expended in finally obtaining the first live and kicking Vietnamese soldier, and now a drunken Poe was arbitrarily attempting to kill him. Determined that this was not going to happen, Burke leaped on Tony's back and placed an arm lock around his bull neck, while attempting to choke him into submission. He probably would not have been successful restraining the roaring man long were it not for the assistance of some PARU. The following day, Tony complained that his throat was sore and neck muscles ached

badly, but he could not remember what had happened. Neither Terry nor anyone else ever bothered to inform him about the incident. ¹

When Vint and I viewed the prisoner, he sat unfettered at a table under a large parachute tent fly. Courtesy of Vang Pao, he had been cleaned up and wore green fatigues with no rank and a red beret, which initially prompted me to consider that he was an officer. His wallet, containing a bevy of pretty young Vietnamese girls' photos, lay open on the table. He obviously was not the mythical nine-foot tall warrior as folklore portrayed Vietnamese soldiers, but most certainly a stud and lover. Reminding me of a carnival atmosphere, the local folk stared at him pointing, laughing, and giggling. Why not, it was their first up close glimpse of a dreaded Vietnamese trooper. In truth, he was nothing more than a poor equivalent of the children's bogymen that had terrified the clans for years. Whoever decided to place the boy on display in the valley was very intelligent, for I believe that in addition to boosting Meo morale, his capture and subsequent display marked a turning point in Meo attitude toward the previously dreaded and feared enemy from across the border.

I never learned the youngster's disposition, but assumed that such an asset was deemed too valuable to kill, and he was ultimately flown to Vientiane for further interrogation and publicity. This indeed is what happened. However, the international media coverage Secretary Harriman sought following a Vientiane press conference proving Vietnamese forces were in Laos never materialized. ²

¹ Terry Burke Email, 03/01/04.

² Tom Ahern, 183-184.

PLANNING

Earlier, to counter diminishing morale in South Vietnam over ineffective operations against the Viet Cong, and to demonstrate USG's resolve in thwarting communist advances, at a high-level meeting, President Johnson approved a portion of the Joint Chiefs of Staff regional air-ground plan. To placate Ambassador Unger's anticipated opposition, this included more U.S.-Lao discussions on limited operations to reduce enemy infiltration through the Lao corridor, by using Yankee Team armed reconnaissance, RLAFF T-28 strikes, and South Vietnamese ground attacks. The plan also included U.S. Navy patrols with air cover.

Late in the month, Unger presented USG's latest proposals for General Ma's Panhandle interdiction to Souvanna Phouma. The Prime Minister reluctantly agreed to the operations, after the ambassador assured him that the strikes would be largely psychological, applying pressure on Hanoi to cease violating the Geneva Accords by using Laos as a supply funnel to the South. Souvanna insisted targets had to be cleared by the FAR General Staff and caution used to avoid civilian areas. In addition, Unger added that such interdiction would not decrease operations along Route-7, where Souvanna anticipated another dry season offensive against Moungr Soui, or require the use of the South Vietnamese Air Force.³

During the period, Ambassador Unger's office forwarded State Department recommendations regarding Lao ground forces military operations over the next six months to consolidate RLG control in certain areas. Believing the operations within the capability of the FAR, the first three-month plan included

³ Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction*, 36-37. Victor Anthony, 139.

consolidating Triangle gains, clearing Pathet Lao from south and west of Luang Prabang, north and northeast of Vientiane, and in the western portion of south Laos from Savannakhet to the Cambodian border. Operations would be conducted to pressure the enemy near Tha Thom and improve Paksane's defenses.

Operations during the next three months related to movements in Military Region Three and Four. Success was contingent on employment of RLAF assets, no ceasefire, and no enemy offense.

After bumping through channels, the Joint Chiefs of Staff forwarded a memorandum to Secretary McNamara concurring with the plan and recommending USG support. ⁴

Monsoon weather continued to restrict military operations mopping up areas north of Vientiane. Except for thirty minutes flight time, Thursday was a washout in the Long Tieng area. Even when the rain ceased, the bowl and its gaps were still clobbered with obstructing clouds. With only two lower gaps to accommodate a helicopter approaching and departing, Site 20-A was unlike Sam Tong on weather days. Even if one managed to exit, there was better than an even chance of not being able to return. After flying more than fifty seven hours in seven days, including some with a new First Officer, a lot of close in demanding work, and the possibility of SAR duty, I was tired, irritable, and initially not that all unhappy to stand down and rest. However, during such times the bowl was a miserable place without much to occupy one's time. It was always chilly and difficult to walk through sticky mud to our sleeping quarters. The gooey mess invariably clung to the smooth soles of one's boots. This substantially increased sole thickness, weight, and caused one

⁴ Memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Robert McNamara, 09/16/64.

to switch from a normal walk to the stiff legged gait of a Frankenstein monster. In addition to being bored, I was always hungry, and this was directly proportional to the increased time on the ground. The only upside to the situation was that by eating several peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and drinking Ovaltine, I recouped my money's worth from the food fund and probably a great deal more.

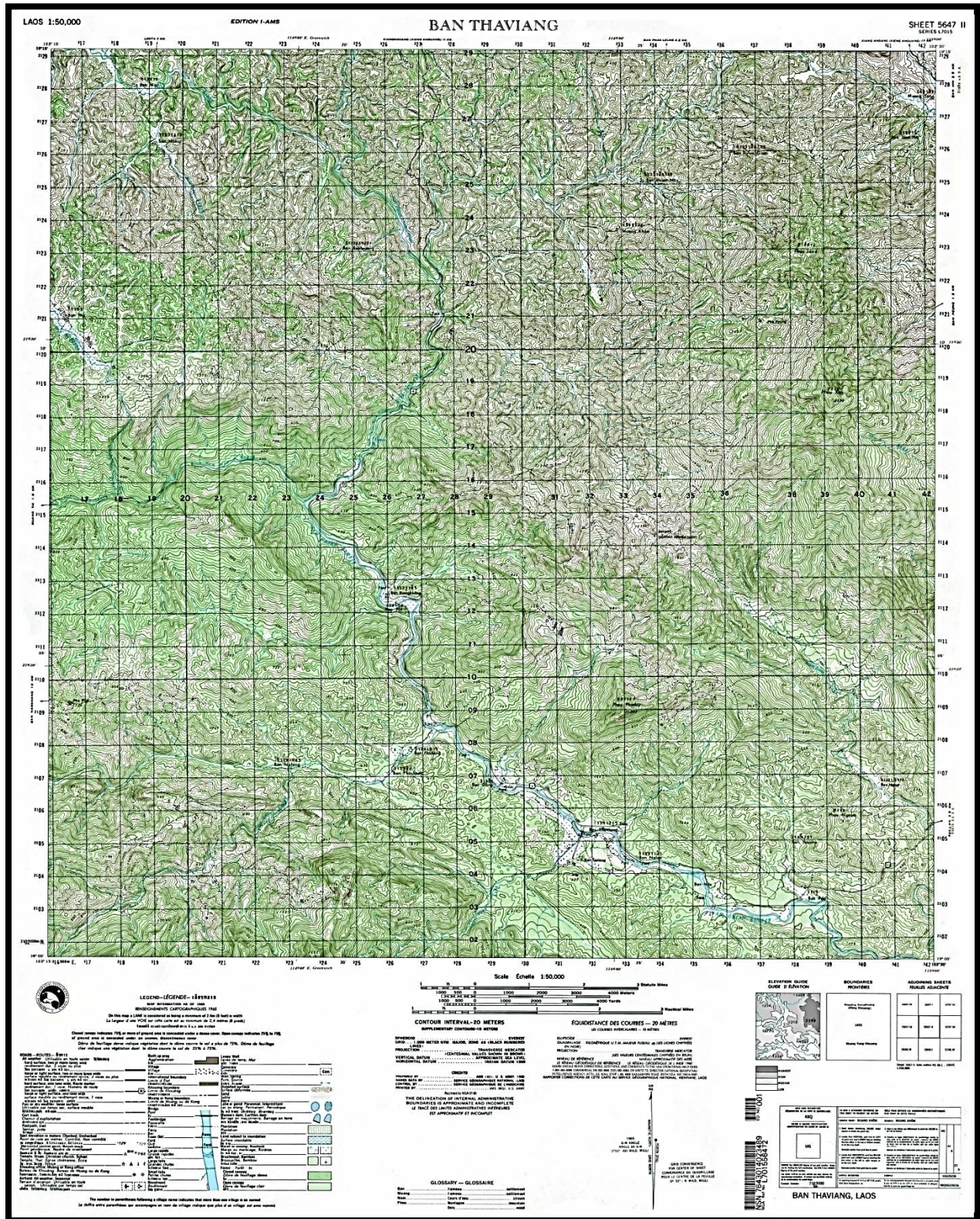
THA VIENG

By 18 September, Vang Pao and his men were poised to commence an offensive to retake Ban Tha Vieng. LS-13, an old position that changed hands almost on a yearly basis. Like the children's game of musical chairs, the site became known to wags as a "musical site." It was located beside the left bank of the Nam Giap and bracketed by mountains. Fed by streams from the Plain of Jars, the lower Padong area, and the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley, the main river watered a narrow valley that must have been agriculturally productive during better times.

Just below Tha Vieng, the Route-4 road and trail following the river on the eastern side from Xieng Khouang Ville diverged, taking a more easterly direction toward Tha Thom (LS-22), while the river flowed directly toward Paksane.

The distance between mountains and the river contained a short Helio Courier strip hacked out of rice paddies when Bill Lair met with and persuaded the general to begin the Meo resistance program in 1961. Captain Ed Dearborn, mistaking Tha Vieng for another longer strip, was reputed to have landed and magically taken off from there in a Caribou.

To support the small operation, Vang Pao selected two H-34 crews to transport personnel, a 75mm "Pack" howitzer, and considerable ammunition to a 4,000-foot ridge in defilade, and well within range of Tha Vieng. Located at the end of the Moung



Lima Site-13 lower right corner on the banks of the Nam Giap.

Oum Valley, the site was the identical place Bobby and I had deposited troops two days previously. The intention of this was now clear: to secure and prepare the site for an operation. Vang Pao's plan was to shell the area while his troops worked their way down forward slopes to the lowland and into the town.

I had observed the impressive 75mm "Pack" howitzer employed during the Phu Khe operation. Compact and weighing less than 1,400-pounds, it could quickly be dismantled into a few pieces that included the barrel, breechblock, wheels, carriage, and trails. Dating from 1927, and adopted by the U.S. Marine Corps, the mountain gun could be loaded on six pack mules (for which it was named) or, during the present day, on one or two helicopters. Offloaded at a site, the simple, rugged gun could be swiftly and easily reassembled by competent artillery personnel, who would soon render it ready for action. Hurling high exploding or white phosphorous rounds more than five miles, an indirect fire mode was employed to saturate areas of contention.

I carried most of the howitzer and two members of the artillery team, while the second ship hauled the remainder of the gun, the general, his bodyguards, selected PARU advisors, and some ammunition. Following a flight through the "back door" of Pha Khao to the Mounng Cha Valley, then along the eastern base of Phu Bia to the landing zone, the short, chubby Thai Army (RTA) artilleryman and his expert team set about offloading and assembling the gun. Within five minutes of landing, and prior to firing for effect, the gun was arcing spotting rounds for adjustment by forward observers at the unsuspecting enemy in the river valley.

Although attaining his present rank in the FAR through Agency assistance, Vang Pao was a true leader and in the field was in his element. While still an enlisted man, Vang Pao had

learned to adore and use the 81mm mortar (named the 4-duece) with deadly accuracy. He was a consummate small unit guerrilla commander. He loved field operations, especially firing weapons, smelling the characteristic smoke of battle, and tasting the danger of combat. He was a genuine warrior. He displayed none of the hesitancy of rear echelon commanders to participate in field operations. Vang Pao was originally a sergeant while working with French commandos in the jungles during the First Indochina War. Vint described to me how in 1954 he guided a large mixed group of French and Meo Marquis north toward Dien Bien Phu to aid the struggling French garrison. Although the column never reached the besieged valley in time to help counter General Giap's troops, the force did manage to rescue a few stragglers escaping the horror of the subsequent forced march to a prison camp.

A high-ranking French officer recognized the youthful Vang Pao as a genuine leader of his people and arranged for him to attend the Dong Hene officer school in Military Region Three, where he excelled and learned the French methods of conducting a war.

Attached as Vang Pao's Case Officer and mentor, Vint attempted to instruct him in the responsibilities of a high-ranking officer and the necessity to delegate authority, but it was difficult, for his mentality was still focused on emulating a small unit commander. For this reason the jury was still out as to whether he would ever be successful in conducting larger scale operations against a determined North Vietnamese force, recognized as possessing one of the best armies in the world.

With all tasks complete, the other helicopter returned to base. We remained as Vang Pao's primary helicopter support and his way home. While the 75 Pack barked continually at the communist dogs below, we shuttled shells and troops to the

landing zone for the remainder of the day. Bobby and I took turns delivering loads. Pleased with the First Officer's performance and technique that now closely paralleled mine, I noted that he performed a commendable job from the left seat. His improved flying was such that I believed it was nearly time to switch seats.

Marking a harbinger of early nightfall, cloud layers from the previous day lingered at higher elevations in lower Military Region Two. I recalled the May incident when, caught out at night, clouds rapidly settled or formed on the hills late in the day effectively closing gaps and passes. Following a final shuttle at about 1600 hours, I conferred with Rashan and asked him to inform Vang Pao that because clouds were already descending into the valleys, we should depart shortly for Long Tieng. I should have saved my breath. Having experienced Vang Pao's propensity to remain in the field until the very last moment during the Phu Khe operation, I knew that he frowned on departing a site until almost dark. Perhaps it was part of his "show the flag" performance to his troops, or simply the man's modus operandi. However, we were ill equipped to spend a night at the artillery site or any outlying location, and because of the still fluid situation and questionable security, I was quite concerned. Besieged by relentless 75mm shelling, enemy forces abandoned Tha Vieng, and the Meo troops were in the process of consolidating their victory. Other than to bask in the limelight of victory, there was absolutely no reason for VP to remain on the hill.

Rashan understood what I attempted to convey, and I kept after him to persuade the general to leave. I continued to stew and bully until, flushed with success and with eyes sparkling, the general reluctantly acquiesced to board Hotel-23 with his bodyguards and staff. Even then, it was almost too late to

return to Long Tieng. Disgusted with the man's stubbornness, I charged south along the Moung Oum valley, and through the already narrowing gap toward Moung Cha. Just as I feared, the Pha Khao "back door" leading to Long Tieng was completely socked in. There was little time remaining until total darkness ensued, preventing us from flying a semi-circular course south down the valley and around the hills. Therefore, eating up precious minutes, I chose to attempt a shortcut. I retraced our path back toward the original landing zone, hoping to discover a way over the hills toward Pha Phai (LS-65) and Padong Ridge. At this time, a RON at the artillery site still remained a viable option. However, I chose to press on, working our way up ravines and squeaking over mountaintops into lower terrain. Then, hugging the left side of the valley as close as possible, I turned northwest toward the Padong site.

Taking a break from the stress, and checking my map for alternate routes, I turned control of the ship over to Nunez. Since we first began experiencing maintenance problems and parts shortages, it became my policy to fly at approximately sixty knots indicated air speed (IAS) with a heavy load. The vibration level caused by old, worn blades was bad enough on my body during normal work, but while flying loaded to the gills and at altitude, sixty knots seemed to be my tolerance level. Consequently, I cautioned Bobby several times not to exceed this observed airspeed. ⁵

The cloud cover had descended to a level that dipped so low over the hills that I never saw LS-65. Even worse, I could see in the distance that Padong and much of the lower terraced shelf was also socked in, as was direct flight to Long Tieng over

⁵ After he was upgraded to Captain, Nunez remarked that I had taught him well, but he never understood my thinking or agreed with me regarding this airspeed restriction.

Padong Ridge. With options greatly diminished, additional complications began to surface. Over the engine and transmission roar, I began to hear shouting and chattering from the cabin section. Punz radioed that Vang Pao and his staff were looking out the door toward the unfriendly mountains of Khang Kho and becoming agitated. Although well to the southwest of the hill mass, we were low and Vang Pao, always trying to be the general while in the air (we let him get away with this rather than push the issue), believed we too were close to the enemy and in imminent danger. Of course, there was a possibility of peril unknown to me. That was always a problem given the lack of communications. Having flown in the area many times before, but perhaps not as low, I felt confident that we could safely traverse it now. Besides, I did not have much choice in the matter. At present, my main task was finding sanctuary for the night. To placate Vang Pao, I told a shaken Punz to assure him we were all right.

Next, someone frantically began grabbing Bobby's ankles from below. Shocked, he reacted immediately. This would have been amusing during normal times, had the situation been different. I did not know if this touchy-feely occurred because they thought Nunez as a new pilot was lost, or to obtain my attention. At any rate, hoping to assuage the passengers' fears, and before they could do something stupid, I assumed aircraft control and told Punz to hand Rashan his helmet. When the Thai man came on the air, I attempted to explain what I was doing, and that we were proceeding with a plan. He indicated that he was worried that Vang Pao, who had a propensity to be very emotional and unpredictable when upset, might shoot someone, but he would attempt to calm him. Great, I needed that bit of information like a hole in the head. Apparently VP was satisfied, for I heard no more from below.

A little Bravo Sierra had gone a long way toward easing the situation. However, in actuality, few options remained available to me other than to parallel the long mountain range we called Padong Ridge toward the Plain of Jars, then swing left at the northern point of Phu Pa Sai, and, if possible, head toward Long Tieng or LS-72. There was a friendly site on the low ground at Ban Hin Tang, but that was a village of lepers cared for by a priest, and certainly not a preferred RON site for superstitious Meo who shunned such unfortunates.

I turned left at the end of Phou Pha Sai without difficulty, but further progress toward Long Tieng proved impossible. Therefore, after tuning the Ban Na beacon frequency, I proceeded in that direction. Even though we were close to friendly areas, I was apprehensive about the prospect of flying low over unfamiliar territory, but at this juncture, I had no other choice. Exacerbating the situation, moderate precipitation continued to beat against the windscreens, further limiting forward visibility. Because of the low cloud cover and lateness of the day, mountain darkness had already settled into the area. As a plus, any enemy patrols, if present, were probably taking refuge for the night against the elements. Then, adding insult to injury, the low-level fuel light on the console began blinking. We covered an eternally long eight miles, and with Ban Na in sight, rather than to chance a landing at Sam Tong, I told Punz to ask Vang Pao if we could stop at Site-15 for the night. By then the general was probably as frazzled as we were and readily agreed to the suggestion. After landing at the top of the strip, Vang Pao never said a word to us, but waved as he and his companions quickly disappeared down the side of the hill toward the village. I mentally cursed the stubborn man's lack of foresight, cooperation, and for causing us unnecessary trouble.

Lately, it seemed that each succeeding RON included its own special crisis. ⁶ Whether it was a nervous SAR standby, a new First Officer to train, receiving a stray hit, working an unfamiliar area close to the enemy, or another Vang Pao aggravation, all were cumulative on my central nervous system, and my body could only produce so much adrenaline. Depletion of this chemical, coupled with tension stress and chronic fatigue, could pose a serious problem for an aviator. However, with the monthly bucks flowing in, we pilots never discussed or openly complained about the effects of personal fatigue. Moreover, I enjoyed the benefit of youth's recuperative powers, and generally slept surprisingly well in the Sikorsky Hotel. I rarely experienced sleepless nights, and several uninterrupted hours rest each night helped immeasurably. Nevertheless, I often experienced early morning sluggishness in the cockpit, which I managed to shake off after being airborne a short time. Sometimes I believed I must have possessed an additional set of adrenal glands that enabled me to endure the varied situations that constantly confronted me.

After politicking and partying throughout the night with village leaders, the following morning Vang Pao and his group straggled to the helicopter and we returned to Site-20A. Then we were assigned to Houa Moung to work with Colonel Tong's mixed FAR and Meo troops. Lack of fuel still constituted a concern at outlying sites. Unless one hauled a few barrels of gasoline from Long Tieng, work time there was limited. Because launching on a SAR from Site-58 was always a possibility, we were supposed to tally the number of available fuel drums and relay this to the Vientiane Operations Manager on a daily basis. It was a good policy in theory, but rarely proved accurate. Pilots would often

⁶ I could not anticipate the enormous fun lying in store for me in future months.

forget to pass the information to Vientiane and the locals liked to use gas to start cooking fires. In fact, if more than one H-34 worked the area, sometimes until new areas developed and were supplied by frequent air drops, we would have to shut down and wait for a Helio Courier pilot to ferry a couple of fuel drums to us so that we could return to base.

We finished the day helping to consolidate gains attained at Tha Vieng and the impending capture of Tha Thom.

THA THOM

A number of helicopter pilots participated in the final phase of the recapture of Tha Thom. On 18 September, Wayne Knight, who still occasionally flew the line, arrived early at Long Tieng in Hotel-15 with Sam Jordon and Blacky Mondello to contribute his services to the eastern operation.

The following day, Knight worked out of and RON at Paksane. Tha Thom proper lay in the widest part of a fertile valley, well-watered by the Xan and Hat rivers. Forty miles to the southeast of Tha Thom, the long valley abruptly terminated at the base of the Phou Mathao range.

One of Wayne's flights was to Ban Tha Si (LS-61), located sixteen miles southeast of Tha Thom at trail's end; another trip was conducted along a trail three miles northwest of Ban Tha Si. One advantage of working in the valley was the 800-foot ASL elevation. Even though daytime heat raised density altitude, decent troop loads could be hauled to sites there to monitor and block PL movement into and out of the area. ⁷ Moving constantly toward Tha Thom with the ground troops, he continued to work the valley for three days, and actually logged a shutdown at LS-11 on the 21st. The tropical valley was liberally blessed with

⁷ Density Altitude: Even at lower altitudes, heat and humidity raised power requirements for actual helicopter performance.

mature coconut trees laden with ripe fruit. After each landing, troops supplied semi or ripe coconuts filled with juice for the pilots to drink. Even during the rainy season, temperature, often over a hundred degrees, and humidity were oppressive in the valley, and in lieu of drinking warm or contaminated water, the sweet coconut milk was very refreshing. Wayne drank two with relish, but after consuming more, became ill. Unaware of the dynamic results of the excess liquid, Sam Jordan experienced the same effect. ⁸

General Kham Khong, not normally possessing a dynamic character, was in a good mood. On the day of the major victory in the Tha Thom Valley, celebrations and partying took place at Paksane, but without benefit of alcohol. The general's normally staid demeanor was relaxed and, for the first time anyone could remember, after feting the crews royally, he insisted on providing "dessert" at a local house of ill repute. Although some partook of the favors, without benefit of booze, and after observing the less than exceptional looking females paraded before them, the situation became embarrassing and difficult for married crewmembers. Not willing to chance contracting a virulent venereal disease from female employees of the military-patronized house of prostitution, two Filipinos quietly slipped out a convenient open window. When the remaining men explained that they were exhausted from the day's work and still feeling the effects of too much coconut milk, the general relented and allowed them to leave. ⁹

Mike Marshall also RON at Paksane for three days, participating in the Tha Thom operation during the recapture

⁸ Unless consumed to excess, immature coconuts, containing sweet clear liquid, did not produce the same laxative effect.

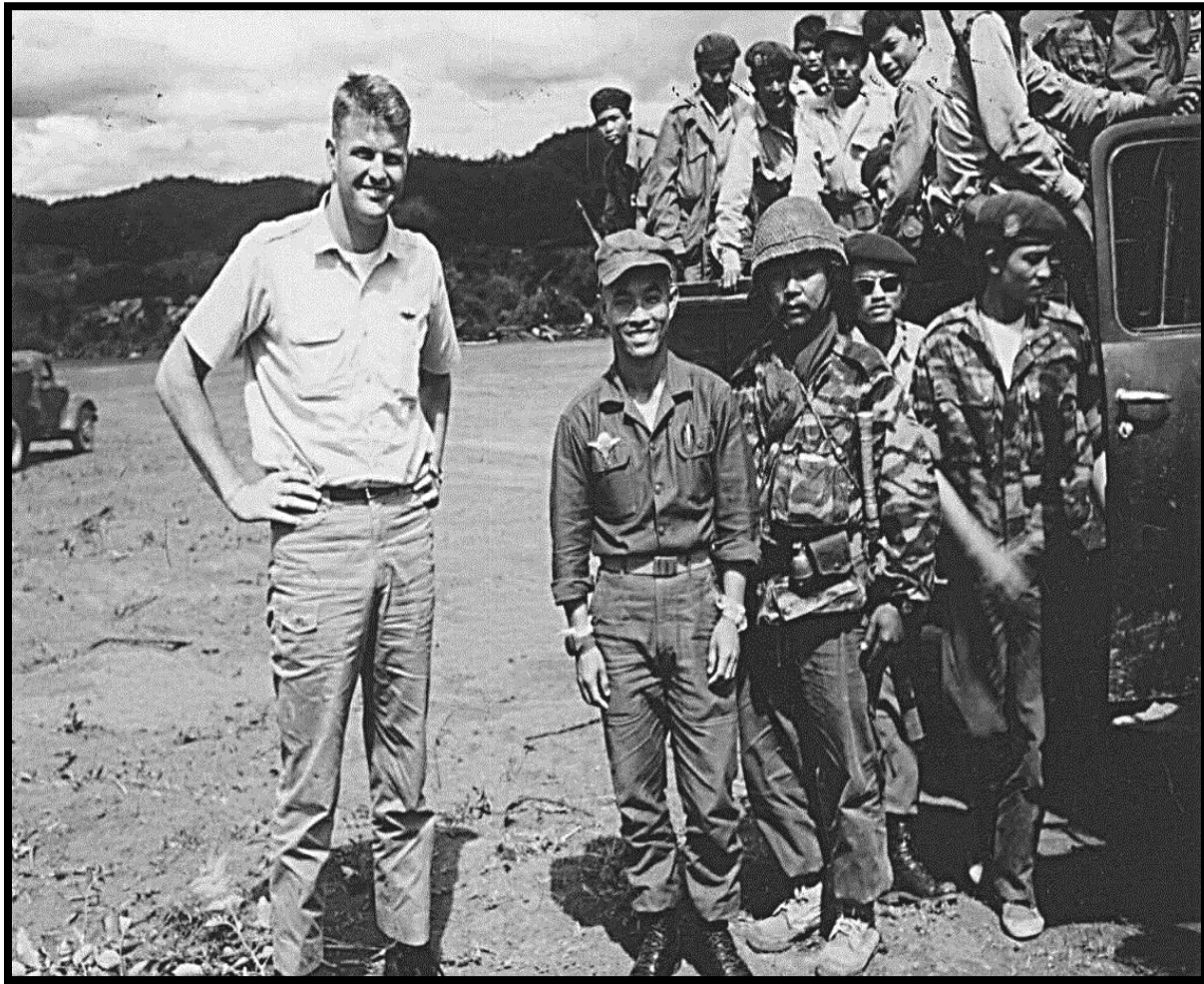
⁹ EW Knight Emails 06/29/00, 07/01/00, 07/02/00.
EW Knight Flight Time Report for September 1964.

phase. He flew Hotel-21 with Louie Moser, a lead ground mechanic who rarely flew except on local test flights. Despite the influx of new Filipino Flight Mechanics, increased operational requirements dictated that all available personnel be pressed into service.

Mike actually landed and shut down at Tha Thom a day before Wayne. He noted that enemy weapons were heaped alongside the grass field, while troops busily stacked and burned what they could. He was amazed at the number of different weapons represented, particularly the tripod-mounted 12.7mm machine guns. Asked where they were captured, a lieutenant pointed toward areas close to where Mike had been "disoriented" in weather only a few weeks previously.¹⁰ This revelation gave him cold chills, for he was unaware that the area contained that much AAA capability.

Marshall remained upcountry for three additional days, during which he worked between Long Tieng and Tha Thom. On one trip, he hauled a tightly trussed young Vietnamese soldier of about eighteen, captured by Meo along Route-4 while he and friends were attempting to withdraw to Xieng Khouang Ville. He was the only survivor. Mike, feeling compassion for the youngster, offered him a cigarette, which was refused. The pilot then flew the POW to Site-20A, where he believed he would be interrogated and sent on to Vientiane. A little later Mike heard machine gun fire. When he inquired about the prisoner, Tony informed him the boy was dead. Apparently, he would not divulge any information, so Vang Pao had him killed. Such action was not unusual. Except for the "hole" near a large karst, no real facilities existed to house prisoners. In such cases, the general encouraged his youngest warriors to shoot the

¹⁰ Pilots were never lost.



Captain Mike Marshall towering over Neutralist General Kong Le and his subordinates at Tha Thom, Laos.

Marshall Collection.

individual. This action was intended to "blood" the trooper, dispel aversion of killing a human, and introduce them to the horrors of war. Sometimes villagers would drag the corpse of a particularly disliked enemy down the strip where he would be exposed on the east side to rot in the hot sun and for the village dogs to eat.

Mike had delivered Pathet Lao prisoners to Long Tieng before, and to his knowledge, they were never terminated. Afforded the opportunity to join the FAR, they invariably chose the limited option. With the revelation of the boy's death, Marshall became angry and told Tony he would never deliver another POW to Long Tieng. However, he was talking to the wrong person, for even if Poe cared, he had no control over Vang Pao in such sensitive matters.¹¹ Following the successful Tha Thom operation, there were additional Pathet Lao defections, but mostly to FAR units. Few enemy were willing to subject themselves to harsh Meo justice. This trend continued throughout the entire war and resulted in many fight-to-the-death engagements.

When I eventually landed at Tha Thom, I spied a huge pile of ashes heaped in the center of the grass strip, attesting to the great number of enemy weapons destroyed. I never learned why the rifles were burned and not flown to Paksane or Long Tieng for recycling. Perhaps they were damaged beyond repair, or FAR leaders feared an imminent communist counterattack. The work assignment was poor timing, for I did not yet possess a personal rifle, and wished that I had had a chance to assess the various weapons.

Other colorful stories evolved during and after the Tha Thom operation. While FAR troops consolidated gains, Captain Ed

¹¹ Mike Marshall Email, 08/14//99, 08/20/99.
Mike Marshall Flight Time Record for September.

Reid idled at low RPM, as handlers loaded his H-34 in the valley. After finishing a soft drink (the word was out about drinking too much coconut juice), he carelessly tossed the bottle out the cockpit window. The missile arced through the rotor disc, striking, exploding, and damaging all four main rotor blades. While explaining the incident to the CPH, the stoic individual was straightforward and embarrassed. Wayne, aware that nothing he could do or say would make Ed feel any worse, imposed no penalty.

Perhaps the only unusual story of its kind arose during this period. After the conquest of Tha Vieng, relatively newly elevated Captain Marius Burke was scheduled to work early east of Long Tieng supporting landing zones around Site-13. Highly motivated and eager to duplicate the ten hours his peers targeted each day, he planned to begin work at 0530 hours. Against this end, the aircraft was preloaded and the Filipino Flight Mechanic slept in the ship, a necessity when sleeping accommodations were scarce. Burke found it almost impossible to sleep at The Alternate when something important (like a SAR) was scheduled the next morning. Therefore, following a restless night, he rolled over and checked his watch. He read ten after five. Hustling to make his planned departure time, he gathered his goods, ran to the H-34, and roused the Flight Mechanic out. They were both quite groggy.

The bowl was very dark, but a bright moon clearly outlined the hills as he cranked the engine, engaged the rotor blades, and launched to the east. Other crews were aware that he was departing early, so there was no problem with the noise. He climbed slowly over Padong Ridge to the site, but upon arrival, he noted that the world was still dark. This stimulated his curiosity. Rechecking his watch, he discovered it was not even

close to sunrise, but actually 0230 hours. That day Marius logged sixteen hours. ¹²

WHOOPS

With both Tha Vieng and Tha Thom back in government hands, the enemy withdrawing, and consolidation underway, we continued supplying Phou Sao landing zones with troops and stocks from Moung Oum. In addition to the gains at Sites 13 and 22, Meo irregulars were vigorously moving against enemy strongpoints lost to the Pathet Lao earlier in the year. ¹³

Nunez's approaches and landings had improved to such a degree that I believed it was time for him to conduct more challenging landings from the right seat. After switching seats, I let him fly into a small, one-way-in pad where we had previously landed. Hacked out of a very steep slope, the new landing zone had been constructed in the shape of a square box, reinforced with log sides, and then laboriously backfilled and tightly packed with dirt. A substantial amount of effort had obviously gone into the ingenious project. Jutting horizontally from the mountain, the dimensions of the pad only barely accommodated an H-34s main and tail gear and provided rotor clearance. Moreover, it required precision to conduct a safe landing. Indeed, the pad reminded me of the small landing area on the U.S. Navy CGA ship I had landed on while flying off of Mindoro, Island.

Everything looked perfect until final touchdown. After conducting a controlled, power on, level approach like I had taught him, Bobby failed to fly or hover toward the most forward

¹² Marius Burke Interview, 05/30/98.
EW Knight Email, 11/19/00.

¹³ CIA Daily Brief, 10/01/64.

position of the box, and he landed a couple feet short. He touched the main gear down smoothly, but from our skewed angle, I knew the tail wheel had not reached level ground. Luckily, I remembered to have him set the brakes, so there was little danger of rolling backward. Gritting my teeth, and expecting the worst, I departed the cockpit and checked the rear section for damage. The tail wheel assembly was indeed planted down slope, but I could see no visible damage. Obviously, Nunez was not quite familiar enough with the dimensions and capability of the H-34, and he required more time working in the harsh mountain conditions. However, I considered the relatively innocuous incident an excellent teaching point for one so inexperienced, and a prime example of what could happen to anyone during normal operations.

I worked one fuel load on the 21st with Lazaro, another relatively new Filipino Flight Mechanic. He had a recently recruited young chap along to train. We were tasked to airdrop bags of rice to a difficult, very narrow ridge on the large mountain east of Site-65. On high, windy, downwind sites with little room for error, air dropping provided an excellent and preferred method of safely delivering rice or boxed ammunition. In addition, it was a good policy on new or first-time pads, never constructed for an H-34 to land. Indeed, I had learned my lesson the hard way about landing with fuel and not being able to lift off without draining substantial fuel.

As part of his training, it was the young man's job to drop loads on the pad. While the two mechanics stacked a few bags near the cabin door, I flew patterns over the pad to obtain a better feel of the wind and to show the mechanic exactly where I wanted the rice dumped. When the load was ready, I commenced a long slow approach to maximize the time for him to prepare. While over the pad's lip I gave the signal to drop. Tumbling

down the sheer mountainside, none of the bags hit the proper place. I tried it again at even a slower speed with the same result. When the apprentice Flight Mechanic missed the third drop, I let loose with a bitter stream of invective calculated to obtain his attention and blister his fanny. I was not kind. A fourth attempt was no more successful. Really angry by now, I headed back to Long Tieng and asked the boy if he really wanted to be a Flight Mechanic. I did not believe so, for he had managed to waste 1,000 pounds of rice. I suppose he took my advice, for I never saw him upcountry again.

That afternoon, I deadheaded to Udorn on the Bird Pioneer with Jim MacFarlane. After takeoff, Jim let me fly the monster south. I thought the yoke on the Navy PV-5 I flew with the San Francisco Naval reserve unit, to satisfy my four-hour monthly flight requirement before mustering out of the Marine Corps, was large and unwieldy. However, the Pioneer's yoke was all of that and more. The lumbering beast seemed to waddle through the sky, but I managed to fly it. After he landed at Udorn, I gave Jim eighty-seven dollars from the money I collected at Long Tieng to cover our food fund debt to Bird.

Operations left me alone four days. I noted that the new maid was still taking decent care of the house, but there was still no Sang present to take charge and help me wile away the long, lonely hours. It appeared that the young lady had vanished from the face of the earth. I was confused, as such behavior was uncharacteristic. Since Sang had moved into Sopa Villa, she had appeared to be an uncomplicated, considerate person, one honest and reliable in dealings with me. I had feelings for her, but they certainly never encompassed love; it was more of an instinctual need. During our relationship, she had been a good partner and companion, while providing warmth and humor required for my well-being. Now, I had nothing but my own pitiful company to fill the lonely void during off time. The vacuum was difficult to satisfy in regard to primary human requirements: hunger, thirst, and sex.

I journeyed across town to visit Billy Zeitler, who appeared to be recovering satisfactorily from his wounds and burns. Always cheerful and funny, except for flash burns that left part of his face and arms a blotchy red and white color, he was the same Billy Z I admired and trusted. I heard talk about a statement he reputedly wrote for the Company that indicated he was glad he did not have a gun along with him on that fateful day, for he might have been tempted to employ it. Because we were still in the process of covertly acquiring and carrying personal weapons upcountry, the gun issue was touchy, one we did not appreciate surfacing. Such a statement did not sound like Billy, so I chose to discount the rumor. While we talked, unsolicited and with some passion, he related how he had killed two men with his bare hands. I knew from our wrestling demonstration at the Air America compound that he was certainly

strong and capable enough to have done this. But because it was never mentioned during bar talk, the shocking account left some doubt in my mind as to its veracity.

On the 26th, I participated in local night flying proficiency training with Steve Stevens and "C" Decosta. Steve, an experienced fixed wing and avid instrument pilot, surprised me when he lowered his seat to more easily view the console instruments at eye level. This was logical, but the first time I had ever seen anyone do that.

With increased activity at the field, U.S. Air Force tower operators either monitored their radios or conducted operations on some nights. During these periods, Ground Control Approach (GCA) practice was available. Unless Air Force operators were highly experienced in working with both jets and helicopters, separation problems could result from the considerable speed differences. The H-34 plodded through the air on downwind at eighty to ninety knots, and at much lower speeds during final approach. I had experienced this conflict between fast and slow movers at several Air Force facilities while still in the Corps.

As I was terminating a GCA approach, the operator screamed several times in a very high octave, "*Hotel-21 immediately clear the runway!*" It was the first inkling I had that an aircraft was behind me on final approach, and when I hovered onto the grass median, a jet screamed by. Implications of what could have occurred did not contribute to an enjoyable night flying experience.

Houa Khong Province (more commonly known as Nam Tha) was merged into Laos in the late 19th century when interested Europeans deemed the Mekong River the most expedient demarcation line between British-controlled Burma to the northwest and French-mandated Indochina. China to the north and Thailand to the south also bordered the province. A large Mekong River tributary, the Nam Tha nominally separated Houa Khong from Luang Prabang Province, while the entire area encompassed Military Region One.

Three principal towns--Ban Houei Sai (L-25), Nam Tha (L-100), and Moung Sing (L-42)--represented relatively significant population and trade centers throughout the region's history.

Positioned on the banks of the Mekong, Ban Houei Sai very early gained importance as a river transportation and trade hub. Located across the river from the Chiang Khong, Thailand, sister market town, Houei Sai served for centuries as a locus for Yunnanese caravans traveling to the northern Thai population centers of Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai. During French rule, Fort Carnot (the citadel) was erected on a hill overlooking the market town. Except for the river towns, few Lao resided in the province. This left room for many additional tribal groups. Of the thirty nine ethnic groups in the province, Ban Houei Sai claimed thirty four. A few of the major clans included: Meo (and their various sash-colored distinctions), Iko, Mien (Yao), Kui, Khamu, Phai, Lamet, Samtao, Tahoy, Shan, Phu Thai, Thai Dam, Thai Khao, Thai Daeng Thai Lu, Phuian, Thai Nai, Ngo Kalom, Phuvan, Lao Huay, Musoe (Lahu), and Chinese.

Located only fourteen hours walk from the southern Chinese border, Moung Sing sprawled for miles over the Nam La River plain. From the late 16th century the area was part of the

principality of Chiang Khong, until 1803, when it came under the control of the Nan Kingdom. Like most lowland valleys, Thai Lu (generically called Lao Theung), a Tai-speaking people once part of a feudal kingdom in southern Yunnan, settled and established their capital in the area. With British control waxing in Burma, Shan princes fled to Moung Sing and southern Yunnan in 1885. As a result, the British governor claimed the area, but while the two colonial powers amicably carved up the region, the Brits abandoned all land east of the Mekong in deference to the French in 1896. Historically, largely because of Chinese influence and road accessibility, the area's one claim to fame was as a market town servicing Meo, Yao, Thai Neua, Shan, and Yunnanese. Since the RLG lost the upper portion of the province to the communists in May 1962, much of the valley was abandoned.

Surrounded by mountains, as Moung Sing, the Nam Tha area and valley was also impacted by the stunning RLA loss. The town was also a sizeable market town for all thirty nine ethnic groups residing in the province. ¹

Route-3, a rudimentary artery, wound generally south from Nam Tha through mountains and valleys toward Ban Houei Sai. Contested areas were located at Ban Vieng (LS-135), a crossroads valley at Vieng Pou Kha (LS-152), and Moung Ngeum (LS-168). It became a trail through the mountains until reaching the Ban Ta Fa valley (LS-216). ² The trail generally followed the Nam Ngay, and stopped at Ban Poug, a few miles short of the river town. It was along this "road" that intrepid government troops fled and then crossed the Mekong River harassed and subject to

¹ Joe Cummings, *Laos, A Travel Survival Kit* (Hawthorn, Australia: Lonely Planet, 1994) 171-173. McCoy.

² Not all these sites had been numbered before they became significant government sites.

communist pressure. This reversal of power in the Lao conflict, and concern that Thailand might be invaded next, prompted President Kennedy to order the Third Marine Expeditionary Unit to Udorn, Thailand, which precipitated my initial entry into, and participation in, the Second Indochina War.

BILL YOUNG

Customer Bill Young was the offspring of a multi-generational Baptist missionary family residing in Burma and Thailand. During many years of contact with tribal children, while his father ministered in Shan and Lahu native villages, Bill had learned several tribal languages and assimilated cultures. Because of his acquired language ability, and father Harold's intelligence activities during World War Two and afterward, Colonel Bill Lair tapped Young while he was still a teenager to interpret and assist him in one of the first PARU operations intended to eliminate a hardcore band of drug smugglers in the Chiang Mai area. Years later, during a critical period in Laos, Lair once again called upon Young to help create and implement the fledgling Meo program in Military Region Two.

Early in 1962, Bill Lair, then head of the Vientiane-Nong Khai-Udorn AB-1 operation, gave Bill Young the green light to begin developing the northwest region of Laos. Because of his excellent language skills and exceptional capability to operate by himself in the field, in January 1962, Lair reassigned Case Officer Young from Vang Pao's Pha Khao training site at Pha Khao west to Sayaboury Province. From Lair's perspective, there was merit in the move, for the area was long considered Vang Pao's fallback region, should adverse politics or the tide of war turn against him. At the time, the young man scouted and probed potential friendly sites in the region. During the month, he and PARU Team-E made contact with Meo clans in the 4,400-foot

mountains northwest of Sayaboury town. There they helped establish the Phu Sam Sao site, which became known as Phou Khong (LS-42)--a site I had worked with Pinky Eaton not long after arriving as an Air America employee. Within a month, Young and his handful of Thai men recruited, armed, and equipped thirty guerrilla fighters. Consistent with Lair's policy for Young to assemble sites and then move on to establish others, Bill and PARU Team-L expanded their efforts south toward the Thai border. Afterward he and members of Team-J progressed northeast and northwest toward Hong Sa (LS-62), attempting to establish friendly areas in between. By mid-year, a team resided for a short time in the hills of Pha Dang overlooking the confluence of the Mekong River and the Nam Beng.

Before Mounng Sing and Nam Tha fell to the enemy in May of 1962, Young had periodically visited Ban Houei Sai to explore the possibility of RLG expansion in that area. After further study, because of the proximity of southern China's border, superiors elected not to proceed with either covert or overt action at the time. Development of the extreme north would have to wait until a later period. This thinking changed with the fall of Nam Tha.

Young was not present during the NVA-PL final attack phase on Nam Tha and the FAR army's cowardly retreat from the Nam Tha Valley. Upon his return to Ban Houei Sai, he learned that the enemy had chased the FAR south nearly to Ban Houie Sai, but timid Lao commanders claimed they did not know where the communists were located. Therefore, a few White Star personnel had marched up Route-3 toward Ban Pong until making contact. The communists' decision not to capture the river town is recorded history.

By mid-1962, Bill had contacted and recruited several loyal English-speaking Shan to train as radio operators and team

leaders. Next, he tapped Khamsene Keodora, a former French Union Army soldier, to recruit Lahu ADC. Some intelligent young tribesmen with potential were dispatched to Hua Hin for radio operator training. He formed other motivated Lahu into action teams, commencing a program to move north and open up the province. It was the beginning of a military force, which eventually grew into thousands of armed tribals; that is if one considered muzzle-loader, crossbow, and slingshot-equipped men such a force. He had to be careful enlisting Lao Theung, and particularly Lu, because in the past many of the lowlanders had willingly collaborated with the Pathet Lao. Yao clans, who later formed the nucleus of the effort, were still located close to the border. However, subject to enemy pressure, some were attempting to work their way south away from the Pathet Lao grasp.

Before the Geneva Accords signing, Young moved across the river to continue his work. At first he lived in a matchbox type Chiang Khong hotel along with Ted Price, a U.S. Marine officer on loan to the Agency. Because Young, like Pop Buell, was not interested in generating paperwork, Price largely functioned as his administrator.

A few months later, Young enlisted Thai carpenters to erect a unique bungalow on the steep bank overlooking the Mekong. The house was located at Heua Vieng (literally head of the town), road's end north of town. It required a brisk thirty minute walk to reach Thai customs, restaurants, pleasure cribs, and the Chiang Khong hotel. The towns of Chiang Khong and Ban Houei Sai were not exactly opposite each other, but offset, with Houei Sai located farther upstream. Remote from the Thai population, to enhance the view and facilitate movement, the bungalow was built directly across from the Ban Houei Sai main boat and customs landing. Oriented to capture gentle evening breezes, a screened

porch overhung the riverbank, and was supported by stout poles sunk deep into the riverbank. After the bungalow was completed, a radio, blacksmith, Thai team, and other miscellaneous shacks evolved. Radio operator training was conducted there and the Bungalow was employed as a transit and communications headquarters. To aid access to the compound, a short dirt strip, surrounded by jungle and running straight into a hill west of the bungalow, was eventually improved.

At this time, except for Nam Thouei (LS-118) and Ban Na Woua (LS-109), generally all territory north of Houei Sai was considered within the Pathet Lao zone of influence. Nam Thouei was the equivalent of the Sam Tong refugee center in Military Region Two. Using a team of sixteen Shan and Lahu agents to select bases and organize runway construction, these sites had been developed and organized to accommodate refugees trickling down from the oppressed northern regions.

Ban Na Woua, located north-northwest of Site-118, was an ill-conceived location for Helio Couriers to operate. It provided only one landing and departure direction. In addition, because of high trees on the final approach path, normal landings proved impossible, and the site lacked any provision for a pilot to go around. These detrimental factors coalesced one day when Young crashed there with Captain Bob Smith while attempting to deliver a full load of cratering charges to develop the site. Making matters worse, Young was carrying a pocketful of volatile blasting caps,

Light rain on the windscreen and sun restricted visibility. A tall tree located on final approach required a steep descent angle and a flared landing, followed by a high power taxi up a ski slope type runway. The tree was visible from a distance. Flaps were down, and it looked like the plane was above the tree on the horizon. However, on short final, when Bill glanced out

the side window, he saw that they were descending into the tree. He yelled, *Bob! Tree! Pull up! Pull up!*" Bob yanked the yoke back into his lap, resulting in an abrupt climb followed by a stall. The maneuver resulted in drastically slowing and ballooning the aircraft over the obstacle. The plane's nose and wings missed the tree, but smaller branches brushed the fuselage and landing gear. They pancaked hard on the edge of the strip, damaging the landing gear. The men sat in the machine for a time with hearts beating wildly, contemplating their narrow escape. After that incident, Bill was never happy flying in any aircraft.

During the site's development, an H-34 pilot smuggled a few weapons to Site-109. Then selected Lahu and Lao Theung were recruited for basic training.

In late 1962, several months after the fall of Moung Sing and Nam Tha, enemy movements and northern pressure intensified, precipitating large-scale refugee movements. Duplicating an action similar to the 1961 Meo exodus in Military Region Two to safer ground, hereditary Yao leader, Prince Chao Mai, and several thousand followers similarly abandoned villages in the mountains between Moung Sing and Nam Tha and moved south to prepared refugee centers at Ban Na Woua and Nam Thouei. Chao Mai's younger brother, Chao La, elected to remain in the Pathet Lao area of influence to continue the fight for independence, but intense hostilities during November of 1963 eventually persuaded him to withdraw his people to the safety of the refugee camps.

Houa Khong operations against the enemy began in earnest during the summer of 1963. Expediting a plan for retaking the province, using established CIA procedures for opening up a new area to paramilitary operations, Bill elected to create a small pan-tribal army under the command of one to two leaders from

each tribal unit. Since Yao tribesmen formed the majority of fighters, Chao Mai was selected the supreme leader. The council was supposed to assume final authority on all subjects, but since Young controlled funding, he actually dictated all decisions.

The plan was far from perfect, but it worked. Belonging to an organized and combined effort tailored to thwart the enemy, an efficient paramilitary army appealed to the more militant members of the council.

Young supervised construction of a small intelligence gathering camp along the river north of Chiang Khong. Because of the Accord restrictions, Young was not allowed the use of helicopters and Helio Couriers to transport people and supplies in late 1962 and early 1963. Consequently, supplies were ferried from Udorn and Thakli by C-123s to the military base at Chiang Rai, and then trucked to the campsite. In order to implement planned Lao penetrations, along with trusted helpers he traveled to the camp at 0200 hours to load boats with food, ammunition, and other supplies. Then they journeyed upriver to a remote area halfway to Chiang Saen. The delivery was conducted on the riverbank at a prominent loop in the river. Goods were then distributed to thirty Yao teams, consisting of a leader, radio operator, and indigenous types. By 0400 to 0500 hours, the men boated across the river under the cover of darkness to join prearranged transportation. To execute movement into the interior, Young had previously purchased 160 pack animals from KMT soldiers and Haw Chinese, along with one Chinese handler to care for each five mules and ponies. The teams then cautiously slipped through terrain, traversing ridges close to areas of interest around Nam Tha, Ban Vieng (LS-135), Vieng Pou Kha, and Pha Beng Phu Kha (LS-152). During their time in Houa Khong, they distributed supplies to willing partisans in friendly areas,

coordinated fighting, and supported special operations. They also gathered valuable intelligence from the silent zone, and radioed selected information to Chiang Khong.

By late 1963, Young and his helpers had established a network of twenty landing strips, a guerrilla force of several hundred Yao, and additional troops from other ethnic tribes.³

JOE FLIPSE

Thirsting for additional adventure and a hands-on experience with tribal groups, through the auspices of Pop Buell, USAID transferred IVS worker Joseph Flipse from Vientiane to Ban Houei Sai in late 1962. Pressing for more field assignments, he and his assistants erected a mud block house.

Joe spent considerable time with Bill Young coordinating AID programs during the beginning of his tour at Ban Houei Sai. The two went to Chiang Mai for a night, where Flipse gained valuable insight into Young's personality and background. He quickly noted that Young, even though displaying customary native protective tattoos on his calves, was not raised in a grass hut, or as a jungle version of Tarzan. In Chiang Mai, the Young family had maintained a British colonial lifestyle. There was always the thought of regaining or continuing the family dynasty, while riding a large white mule with Great Danes trailing behind. Consequently, his mentality was geared to status symbols that had so influenced his youth.

³ Segment Sources:

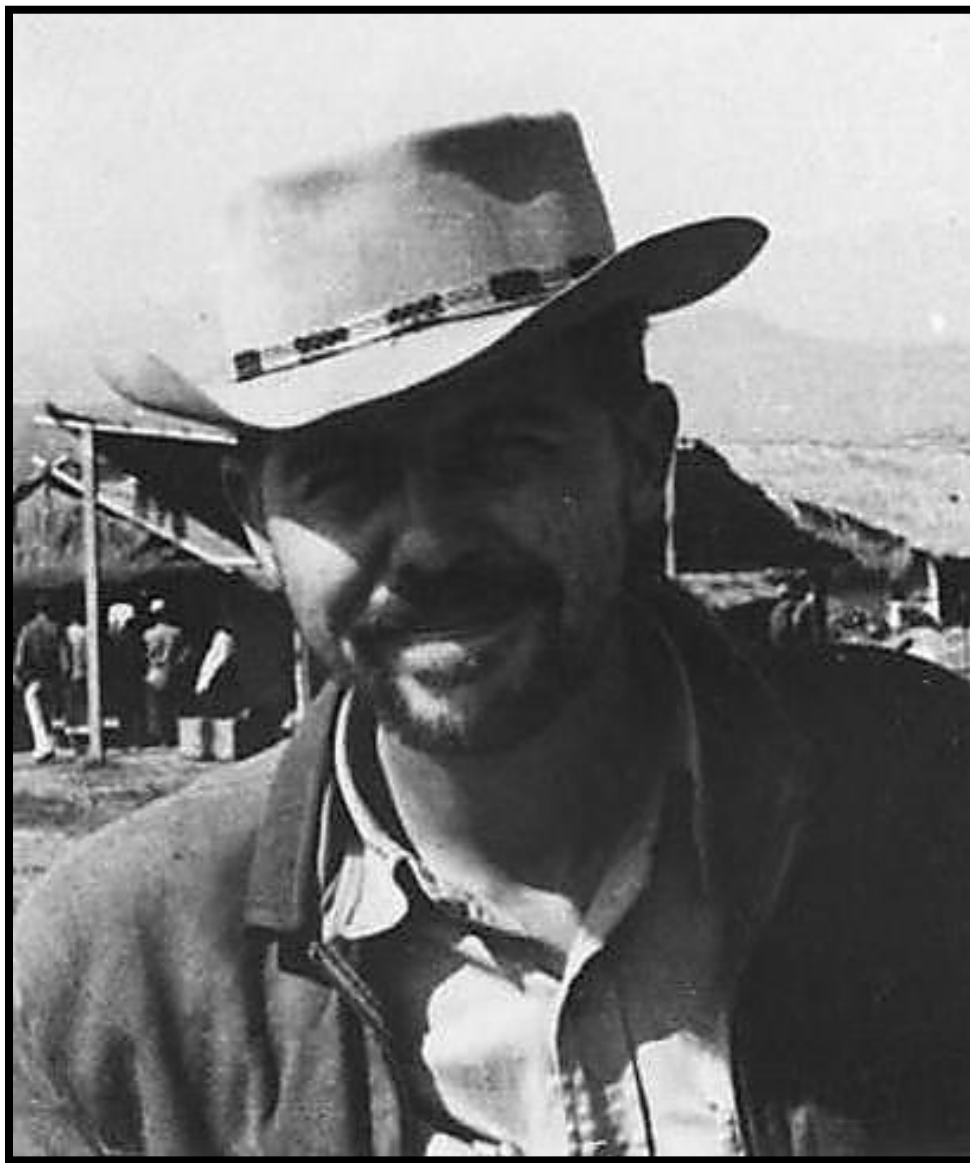
Bill Young Interview with the Author in Chiang Mai, Thailand, 10/19/95.

Phone call Interview by Author from Udorn, Thailand with Bill Young in Chiang Mai, 11/14/96.

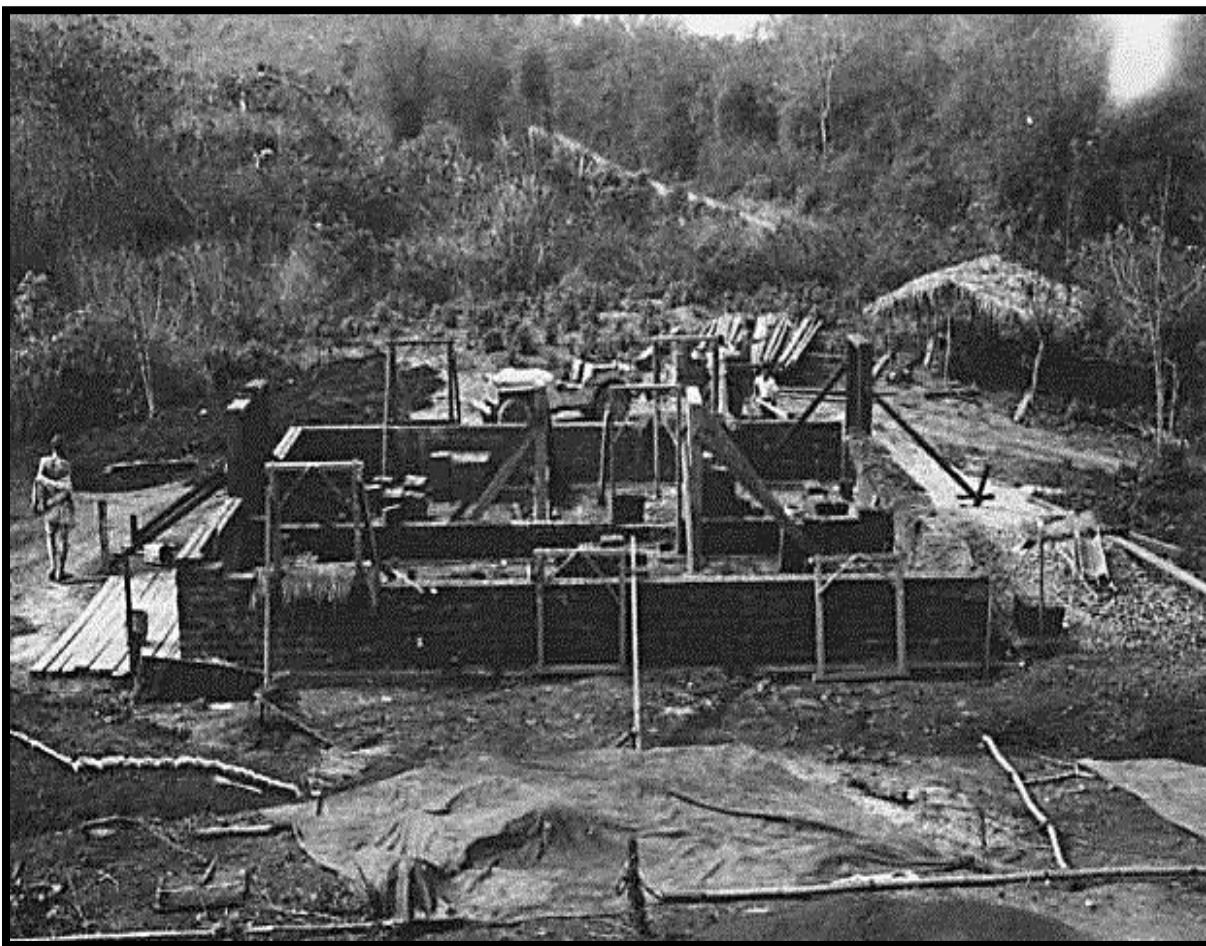
Alfred McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin* (Brooklyn: Lawrence Hill Books, 1991) 298-99.

Ken Conboy, 135.

Joseph Flipse Emails, 05/07/97, 05/13/97, 05/14/97.



Bearded IVS worker Joe Flipse at a refugee camp wearing his characteristic hat encircled with a snake-skin band.
Flipse Collection.



Early construction stage of Joe Flipse's mud block house at Ban Houei Sai, Laos.

Flipse Collection.

For a considerable period, Joe had a difficult time comprehending Bill's actions, until finally understanding that his thought processes were mainly Asian, not Western. Of course, this resulted in convoluted Oriental dialogue and face saving actions, considered far more important than absolute truth. Joe eventually recognized that Bill was unable to manage face-to-face confrontations, but he maneuvered behind the scenes, while attempting to maintain agendas in a constant state of imbalance.⁴

Flipse began to RON at Nam Thouei in the fall of 1963. The population consisted mainly of Yao, a few Haw traders, some Lu families, and Lao Theung troops undergoing training by PARU instructors remanded there for this purpose after April. Because of Geneva Accord protocols the West wanted to succeed, Bill Young was not legally sanctioned to enter Laos. IVS veterinarian Bill Taylor had journeyed to the site many times in a Helio Courier from Sam Tong to assess the refugee situation. During one of these trips, Pop had him return two Yao boys to Site-20 for medic training.

At this time, AID personnel were only seriously working established sites at Nam Thouei (VS-118), Ban Na Woua (LS-109), and Ban Vieng (LS-135). Lu had originally populated Vieng Phu Kha (LS-152), but Lao Theung moved in to settle after Lu refugees chose to move south. Sites at Ban Na Woua and Nam Bu (VS-125) were originally only strips with few actual people present.

⁴ In Joe Flipse's estimation, because of the always present Asian face issue, Young distorted facts during many later interviews with authors, and he would never divulge the "truth" regarding many issues in his operations. Joe notes that McCoy presented an accurate description of events in Houa Khong. Except for several RONs at Chiang Khong, and subsequent interviews, the Author did not know Bill Young well and will limit observations to those trips.

Yao chieftain Chao La and his people had been ejected from their old village. Therefore, hostilities wound down to a low level, and there was not a lot of action at the time. A handful of indigenous teams had returned from training in Thailand and had been dispatched to recruit and organize in their assigned areas. The few teams available were widely dispersed toward Nam Tha to the east and north, and from Vieng Phu Kha south and east in the direction of the Tha River. Nam Bu (VS-125) represented the most northerly hard site. Roving Team-7, located north of Nam Bu, was supported from that site in the beginning. Two teams worked southeast of Phu Kha around the Nam La area, and one was further south of Na La in a Meo populated area.

There were not many established villages in the Site-118 area, other than Lao in Nam La, Ta Fa (later LS-216), and Vien Pou Kha (Site-152). Before hostilities began, most people lived in the localities of Nam Tha and Moung Sing. Another area of Lao lowlanders lay to the west in the Moung Long Valley, watered by the Nam Ma that ran from Moung Sing to the Mekong River at Xieng Kok. Other than Moung Mounge (LS-92), Ban Houei Sai, and river villages, the rest of the area contained only a few sparsely populated hamlets consisting of ten to fifteen houses. During the course of their duties, AID workers were cautioned at all costs to remain clear of the Chinese border.

Joe enjoyed the new and exciting work with tribal refugees. The people were anxious to cooperate, and they only required help with items they could not obtain. Rice was dropped by Vientiane-based aircraft to feed about 800 souls. There were not many Helio Couriers available for work in Houa Khong in the early days. Occasionally, one was dispatched from Sam Tong to work for the day. Later, when more aircraft became available, and the political situation changed, the pilots RON for up to three days. Nothing landed at L-25, as STOL aircraft worked out

of and terminated at Chiang Khong (T-516). Young's radio operators monitored two ancient VHF radios tuned to 121.5 emergency frequencies. However, for Joe, there was rarely any advanced notice of a plane's arrival. Therefore, when hearing an engine, he hurried across the river to the bungalow, never knowing whether the plane would remain and work, or immediately return to Site-20.

Little work was conducted from Nam Thouei in the very early days. Flipse's Lao was sufficiently proficient to journey upcountry without benefit of interpreters. That was a positive factor, for all his Lao assistants had returned to Vientiane after deciding that working on his mud blockhouse and in the field was not suitable to their lifestyle, or conducive to obtaining a comfortable desk job. While staying overnight at Nam Thouei, Joe initially bunked with the Thai PARU team. They lived in two small bamboo houses to the left of, and three-quarters the way up the strip. A rice drop zone was located to the right side of the runway, with training barracks nearer the head of the strip. Later, a hospital and new school were erected in the same area. Karst formations lay at the approach end of the strip and a sizeable eastern ridge locked in the valley from that direction. During the winter, ground fog often inundated the valley until ten o'clock. In such a case, a small plane could land at Site-109, where the elevation was usually above the fog level, and wait for the sun's heat to burn off the mist.

Later, IVS/AID employees were criticized for locating airstrips and villages in indefensible valleys. However, complaining rear echelon bureaucrats believed that third world water always flowed from a tap. Despite criticism, Site-118 was well watered. In addition to an accessible creek, using a system of split bamboo troughs, enterprising individuals piped water to their homes from springs on both sides of the valley.

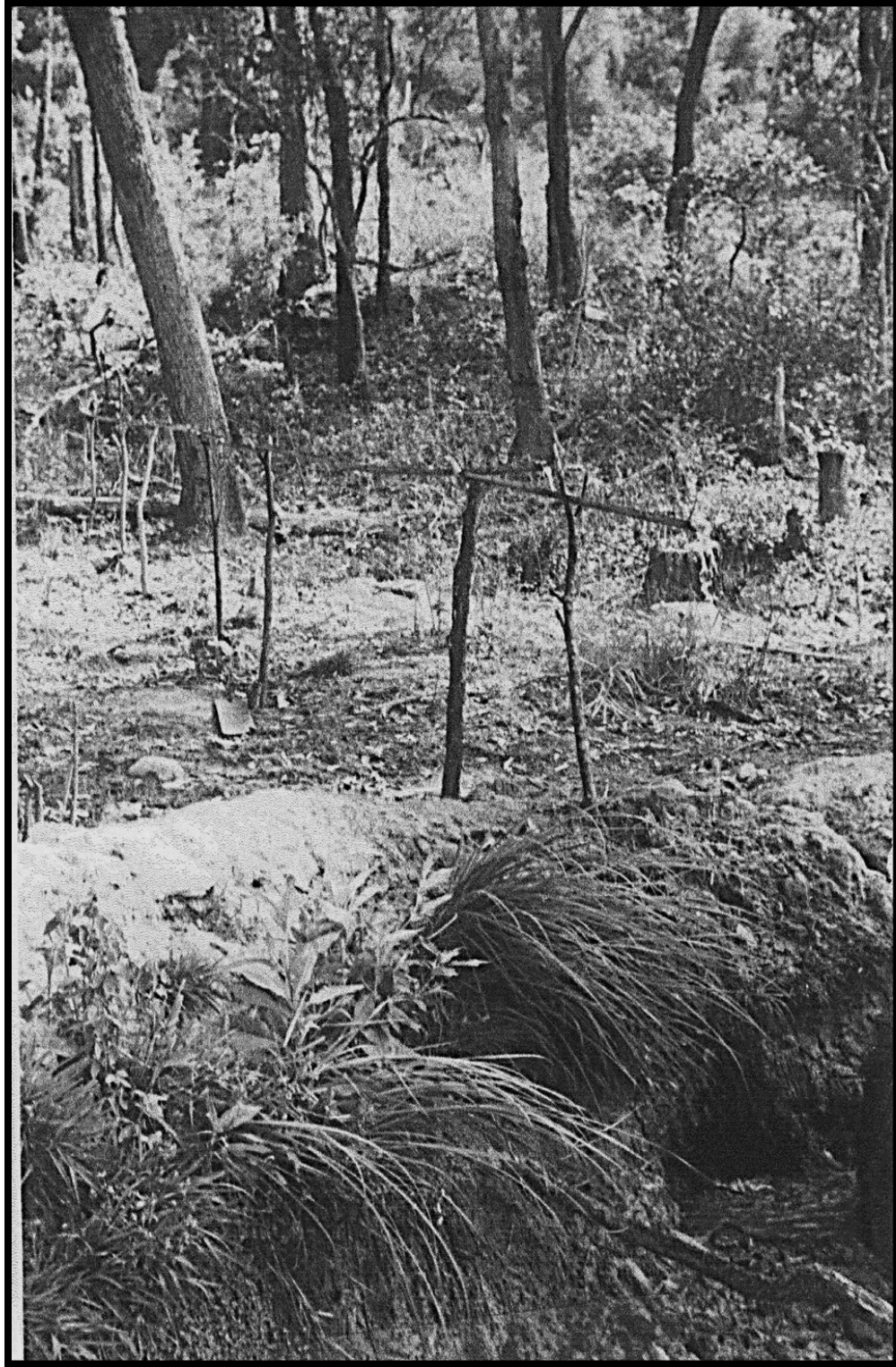
YAO

Overall Yao and Meo culture, tribal customs, and mores were quite similar in many respects. However, the Yao had a more recent Chinese heritage and there were a few major differences in cultures. Both tribes possessed their own unwritten language, but the Yao also read and wrote Chinese. They also emulated Chinese family customs and religion, whereas, except in a few cases where Catholic influence prevailed, Meo clans were strictly animists and generally failed to follow any world religion. Another major difference was family structure. There were exceptions, but it was extremely rare for a Yao man to keep more than one wife. The Yao also used traditional Chinese scrolls and paintings at their funeral proceedings.

Yao and Meo houses were similar in construction. Yao houses at Nam Thouei were built on the ground and elongated, with split and spread out plank walls. Roofs consisted of half split bamboo pieces alternately laid with curves up and down. These ran in a continuous length from a five foot tall eve to the ridge. A single door was constructed of saggy bamboo that required lifting to swing open. A one-foot panel at the bottom of the doorframe was designed to prevent hog entry, but chickens managed to hop over the barrier. No formality existed when visiting. One merely entered a house without knocking.

The family cook stove always stood by the door. Fashioned from baked clay, the range essentially formed a wall that rose from the ground with a firebox that angled toward a smaller hole to accommodate the pot or steamer that was in use. Lacking a chimney, heat and smoke from a fire wafted through gaps between the pot and stove.

Very little was wasted in the Yao culture. A female cook raked cold ashes from the fuel hole and mixed them with a little water to form a semi-solid lump. Then the mixture was wadded



Example of Asian split bamboo tribal aquaducts employed to deliver water to villages.

Author Collection.

into a ball and stuck on top of the previous day's savings to provide lye when manufacturing soap. Meat was dried on a woven bamboo rack placed above the stove. Seeds were stored above the meat. Soot that accumulated in cobwebs near the roof was used in treating cuts and abrasions. Other than a table and sleeping cubicles, the houses had open interiors. One wood table was normally constructed from two rice drop pallets, and diners sat on small round bamboo stools commonly used throughout Laos.

Flipse often ate with Yao chieftain, Chow Mai. Whenever Joe was at Nam Thouei without a cook, Chow Mai's father-in-law, a former Tasseng, customarily stopped at his hooch late in the day, inviting him and any others present to supper. Dinner was casual and prolonged, generally two hours in duration.

The delicious food was not the elaborate Chinese type, but was prepared country style. People filled individual rice bowls from common meat and soup dishes. Usually a combination mustard cabbage and pork, with thin rice noodles was served. Everything appeared clean, and Joe never knew anyone to experience stomach problems after eating a Yao meal.

Early in the refugee program, when Bill Taylor substituted for Joe, he was invited to supper. A couple of socially obligated belts of locally produced corn whiskey were always the norm prior to a meal. The booze was fine, but after being stored in five-gallon kerosene tins, it had a distinctive petroleum taste. Joe never discovered whether the containers were used for medicinal purposes, or merely as a storage facility. Contrasting from Meo diners who used utensils, the Chinese-influenced Yao, except for soup, ate noodles with chopsticks. On this particular night, Taylor, curious as to the bowl's contents, lifted a spoon and stirred the soup. From the cooking fire's dim flickering light, he thought a baby's hand emerged from the bowl. Thoroughly shocked, he did not say anything, but an image of

cannibals entered his mind. Then he looked around the table. Everyone was chattering and not interested in what he was doing, so he stirred the soup once more. This time when the object rose to the top, he clearly recognized it as a gibbon's hand. Bill was immensely relieved, but consumed no soup that night.

Soon after arriving in country, Flipse learned never to inquire as to the food's contents or derivation. Naturally, he was curious at first, but soon stopped asking, as the answers were not always appetizing. He had learned while assigned to Pakse that Lao officials went to great lengths attempting to have fun with Americans regarding food. After learning that they could not intimidate their guests, especially following a few shots of whiskey, they ceased their childish games. The Yao never attempted such foolishness, and always treated their guests with respect.

Yao men raised hogs for food and mules for pack animals. They were excellent muleteers, traveling between Nam Thouei and Nam Nhion on the banks of the Mekong to obtain kerosene, cigarettes, candles, matches, and other consumables not available locally.

Traditional male clothing was dark blue with some red and white piping on the jacket and button loops. Handmade buttons were formed from silver, along with one or two small ornaments shaped like a fish. The short jacket exposed an area above the waist, and buttoned double-breasted style to one side. Baggy Chinese type trousers were secured by a sash embroidered at one end. The cloth, actually a long hollow tube, also served as a carry-all for personal items and rice when in the field. Young style setters, who loitered around the strip, usually slung a white towel around their necks with a toothbrush dangling from one corner. Older men still wore traditional red turbans. Younger men wore a black beret or went about bareheaded.

Centuries of walking barefooted changed with the introduction of military brogans. They were generally three sizes too large, and eventually curled up in the front. Regardless of footwear, while walking long distances, the people always left Americans huffing and puffing in the dust.

As in most worldwide tribal communities, women performed the majority of work. In addition to having and tending babies, they planted and tended corn, rice, vegetable gardens, and opium plots. They hauled bamboo stalks in large baskets for hog food. After the center of the raw material was pulped, it was used to manufacture paper for writing or wrapping opium decks.

During late morning or late afternoon breaks from chores, Yao females sat on a small stool outside the house where the light was good to embroider their clothes. Their pants were elaborately decorated with various colorful patterns. Like their Meo counterparts, they wore the same clothes until the New Year, at which time new garments were donned and the cycle continued until the following year.

The PARU team at Site-118 consisted of five men. They employed a hand cranked radio/generator to maintain contact with Chiang Khong. Another team stayed at B. Na Woua, three hours walk north. Joe periodically traveled there, spent the night, and then, escorted by the Thai medic, walked two miles in the direction of Vieng Phu Kha to conduct sick call at a Yao village. At this remote ville, he observed a grotesque, but most fascinating sight he ever witnessed during his entire time in Laos. A bear had previously attacked a Yao woman, severely clawing her face to a point where it looked like a Halloween mask, with her flesh hanging loosely attached to one ear. Amazingly, she survived the ordeal without benefits of modern medicine. Skilled villagers reattached what was left of the gory mess, and somehow controlled the expected infection. After



Young Yao maidens wearing festive holiday finery during the Yao New Year. Lao doctor in the rear of the group.

Flipse Collection.

healing, the woman's appearance was repugnant, similar to a large lump of dough penetrated with holes. Joe was embarrassed to be caught looking at the unearthly and barely human facade.

Following medical duties, Flipse generally rested there overnight, and then returned to Nam Thouei.

Joe still worked exclusively for IVS, but as the sole American AID representative in the area, and with paperwork and other required duties awaiting disposition at Ban Houei Sai, he attempted to rotate between the sites. However, since planes were a rare commodity at 118, he was lucky to catch a ride south every three to ten days. ⁵

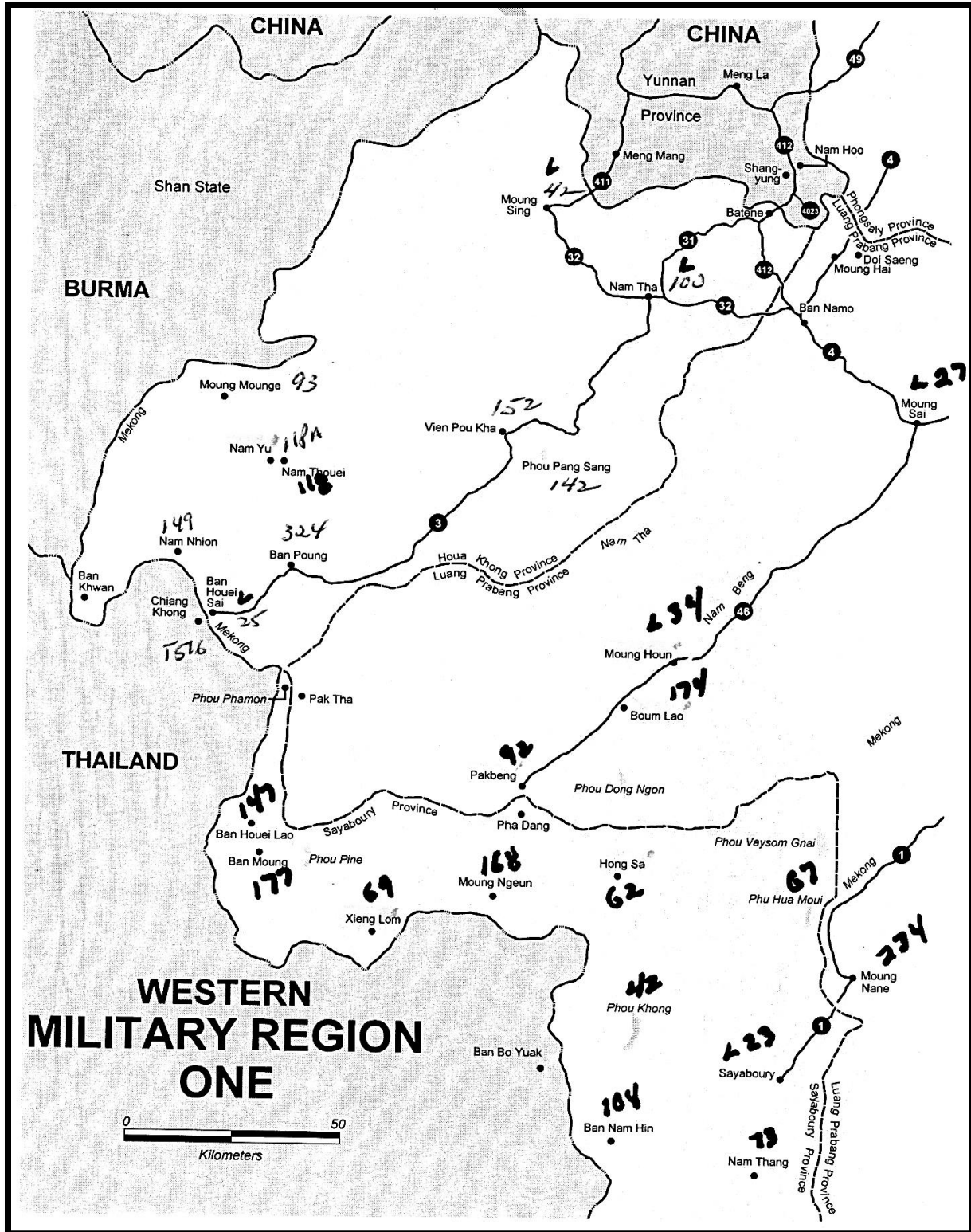
EXPANSION

By the fall of 1964, compared to 1963, AID's expansion of refugee support in the province had progressed appreciably. Airdrops and delivery to airstrips by Air America and Bird aircraft were the main avenues available, especially in more remote areas. Priority rice drops to principle refugee centers at Ban Nam Thouei (LS-118, 1,476 sacks) and Ban Na Woua (LS-109, five miles north, 666 sacks) continued on a monthly basis. Several other sites cleared by FIC were scattered throughout the Zone Victor area, and many were supplied only on request. ⁶

Mu Shu and his people were located at a site twelve miles northeast of Site-118. Mai Khong Gurt, who previously served as the Lao Theung Nai Khong, controlled the people there. It was customary to employ former leaders in civilian and military roles, but they were often inept, and could not function well in

⁵ Numerous Flipse Emails.
Blaine Jensen Letter, 07/25/97.

⁶ Clusters of drop zones in Military Region One and Two were assigned alphabetic letters and red recognition signals. They tended to reveal what sites the RLG controlled toward the end of 1964. Sites supplied by the RLAF are not listed.



A few of the sites in both Houa Khong and Sayaboury Provinces developed and worked by Air America pilots over the years. Site numbers added by the Author.

Conboy.

unwanted jobs. Mai Khong Gurt, considered a real aborigine, proved to be one of these. There had been initial hope for him. Although he was placed under Chao Mai as part of the civilian structure, he never measured up to expectations. Sen Sai (LS-162) formed part of Khamsene's operation. Tong Prang, (LS-145) and Ban Mook west of the Nam Tha, were similarly part of the early expansion toward the river boundary. Nam Tha type Lu lived in the rice paddies beside the Ta River. They developed a functional boat, unique to Laos, to accommodate seasonal river changes from flood stage to a normal flow, with removable sideboards for dry season operations.

Khumu leader Khamsene and the Lu moved to Ban Tha La Houn (Vien Pou Kha, LS-152) after being ejected from LS-135. Following the return to Ban Vieng, the people tragically discovered that the Pathet Lao had booby-trapped a hearth in a cook shack when a mortar round exploded, killing five individuals. The remaining populace, fearing similar incidents, returned to Site-152. Another factor influenced the decision to leave for Vien Pou Kha. There was never enough land available at Site-135 to eliminate paddy dikes and create an air strip long enough for planes.

Phou Sang (Phou Phang Sang, LS-142 in Zone Uniform) was a Meo site, located thirty miles east of Ban Na Thouei. Egotist and braggart Captain Mua Sue (Moua Su), son of the Bouam Long (Site-88) commander, appointed by Vang Pao to his position for political reasons, led the people there. An opportunist, he twice managed to wheedle extra rice drops out of Ban Houei Sai, Sam Tong, and Long Tieng until AID workers discovered his deceit. In Flipse's estimation, the Meo never contributed anything positive to the war effort in the province. Except for stepping on friendly mines, they never suffered a casualty, or participated in any ground action.

Moung Mounge, LS-93 was nestled in a valley west of Site-118. The area supported refugees from Moung Sing, some Burmese, and other ethnic groups. Joe Flipse considered Lu commander, Major Phay Vilayphan, on a similar do-nothing par as Mua Sue.

Ban Mo Ka Thiat, or Ban Nou Kha Chok-LS-148, north of the bend in the Mekong River was generally supplied from Xieng Lom in Sayaboury Province. Later, it reverted to the jurisdiction of Luang Prabang assets supplying the Moung Houn and Pak Beng Valley. Another location supplied at this time was Ban Houei Lao, LS-147 seventeen miles northwest of LS-69.

Many of the high areas leading toward Xieng Lom and adjacent to the Mekong River from Luang Prabang to Ban Houei Sai had not yet been cleared and secured. Most hilltop drop sites lay in the north-south axis of the "Dog Leg" shaped Sayaboury Province. Coded Zone Quebec, they included Phou Kong (LS-42, the Padre's strip), Phou Nam Nhiou (LS-146), Phu Miang (LS-96), Moung Khiem (Moung Phieng, LS-124), and Phou Houa Moui (LS-67).

Like the Xieng Lom area, much territory either was considered a no-man's-land, or remained in enemy hands north of Luang Prabang. For this reason, we did not venture in that direction or into the far reaches of Phong Saly Province, an area commonly understood to have been de facto annexed by the Chinese. Only one elevated site, Ban Lao Ta (LS-121, Zone Tango) located sixteen miles northwest of Nam Bac, was supplied with a substantial amount of rice (1197 bags). ⁷

⁷ ATOG list of rice/wheat requirements for November 1964. Drop zones cleared with FIC as of 30 October 1964. Joe Flipse Emails-comments pertaining to the drop sites, 06/12/97, 06/16/97.

THE BUNGALOW

I was not through flying for the month. We could no longer complain about low monthly flight time, for with ninety one hours already in the books, I was scheduled to RON and work out of Bill Young's Bungalow at Chiang Khong, Thailand, the rest of the month and into October. We had not been assigning helicopters and crews to work the area for very long, but pilots eagerly anticipated T-516 RONs, for Young's reputation as a gracious host had already filtered through our group. Although flight time would probably not be as high as in Military Region Two, I was ready for a more relaxed atmosphere, away from the combat rigors of Long Tieng and potential SAR requirements.

On Sunday, along with Marius Burke, I deadheaded two hours and fifteen minutes to Ban Nam Thouei (LS-118A) in Bird Helio XW-PCA, for what would become a six-day RON. Later in the day, I assumed command of Hotel-14. I had briefly flown in the area with Don Buxton once before in 1962, but other than that, my experience there was negligible. Marius's experience was zilch. Therefore, instead of waiting on the ground for his aircraft, and to gain some area familiarity, Marius flew with me for two hours. During one trip, I made an approach to a trail on a narrow ridge. On short final, rotor downwash bent bamboo and grass revealing several tribal women carrying basket loads on their backs. Wearing black headdress with red tassels and silver coins, short red and black embroidered jackets, and short pleated dresses, they looked a lot different from Meo women in Military Region Two, who modestly covered most of their bodies. While we stared goggled eyed and waved at them, our gigantic wind machine blew their curved jackets open and their skirts up revealing body parts I had only previously viewed at Minsky's strip establishment in Newark, New Jersey. Our appearance did not seem to bother the ladies and they smiled and laughed at us.

I never learned what tribe they represented from the many ethnic minorities in the province, but supposed they could have been from a clan of Meo in the Ban Na Woua area or perhaps Kho Puli. During the RON, I would see varied dress and hear many different languages spoken by assorted tribes.

Toward late afternoon, we terminated at the Chiang Khong strip. While Joe Marlin tended to the ship, Bill Young arrived in a Jeep and drove us to the riverside Bungalow he had built after he had been required to leave his house at Ban Houie Sai. Large enough to accommodate two crews, the place had a sizeable, airy screened porch with three cubical type bedrooms in the rear. With a commanding view of the river, Ban Houei Sai, and forested hills beyond, it was a wonderful place to RON. It was an area that historically contained precious and semi-precious gems, many found on Mekong River sand bars during the dry season. Howard Estes had mentioned to me that old women came by the Bungalow at night selling diamonds and stones from cigar boxes. He never purchased any, but indicated those who did said appraisals proved they represented real value. ⁸

I found that Young's hospitality was everything pilots had reported. In contrast to the boisterous and gregarious Tony Poe, Bill, a soft-spoken "laid-back" individual, who wore a sarong type dress and no shirt after showering, appeared to have gone native. He also spoke native languages I had never heard before.

Bill employed a five foot nine inch administrative assistant, Soomphorm, called "Sam." He was a Thai-Chinese on AB-1 payroll, who really functioned as "Colonel Tip's" de facto executive officer. Bill made important decisions, but within established parameters, Sam attended to all paperwork, and supervised the operation from Chiang Khong without venturing

⁸ Howard Estes Phone Interview.

into the field. The slim, competent man displayed a bashful smile, exposing a crooked canine tooth, which he attempted to mask by covering his mouth with a cupped hand. He was very unobtrusive, easing in and out of our company without being noticed.

Bill also engaged Jai Noi, sometimes called "Blackie." A very dark Lahu tribal person, an unusual complexion for people in the upper portion of Thailand, he had worked with Bill from the early Padong days. Also having considerable authority, he served as Bill's loyal and personal batman. Noi One, as Bill also called him, was the field first sergeant. He functioned as the triggerman, female procurement officer, and performed other menial duties. However, despite his status, he always deferred to Sam with "yes sir." ⁹ Everyone did. Bill's cook, houseboy, driver, and other Lahu boys rounded out Bill's house staff. ¹⁰

When a servant brought large quarts of cold, strong, delicious Singa beer, I noticed that Bill did not drink. The talk and drink were followed by a decent Thai meal. During the evening, I learned that Bill had attended college in California, and then spent a couple of years in the U.S. Army as a paratrooper. In and out of trouble, he had also acted as his commanding officer's driver. Bill's older brother, Gordon, a more traditional person than Bill, was also active with tribal people and had authored a book in 1962, *Hilltribes of Northern Thailand*. During the course of our conversation, without elaborating, Bill curiously referred to himself as the family's black sheep.

⁹ Today "Blackie" would be called a gofer.

¹⁰ Joe Flipse Emails, 05/04/97, 05/13/97; 05/18/97.

After dinner, Bill announced it was time for "Thai Dessert," and dispatched "Blackie" in the Jeep. I had a vague idea what the term indicated and anxiously awaited his return. Within a short time, "Blackie" returned from town with three local girls, which we all eagerly shared. It had been a long time between drinks of water, and after performing a yeoman's chore with two young "desserts," I went to bed early sated and happy. Distinctly atypical from Vang Pao's mandate forbidding crewmembers mixing with Meo females at Sam Tong and Long Tieng, the colorful RON was beginning on a high note.

I arose early the next morning refreshed, ready to "hit the deck running" for a ten hour day. However, no one was available to dispatch us. I soon discovered that work conditions were quite different in Young's fiefdom, with pilot flight time definitely not a priority. I would not describe the scheduling crew as disorganized, just more relaxed than those in Military Region Two. It seemed strange, for unless they were aware of something I was not, they were only allotted an H-34 and crew a finite number of days and hours each month. I was used to complete Customer utilization of assets, and the delay galled me. I do not believe Marius was thrilled either.

After a leisurely breakfast, Young outlined the day's work. He indicated that with his formidable guerrilla forces scattered among several sites throughout Houa Khong, he controlled much of the area except Nam Tha and Moung Sing. So far, border areas, above the PD-QD coordinates delineated on the sectional map, were regarded by USG as a horizontal demarcation line, to be respected under the tenets of the Lao Geneva Accords. It was hoped that respecting this area would placate ChiCom leaders and prevent a cross border incursion.

Since this part of Military Region One was unfamiliar to me, I felt very uncomfortable traversing some of the area for

the first few days. While initially learning the region, I asked Bill for a general direction guide, like those provided at Long Tieng, to keep me out of trouble. He laughed, indicating that no such guide was available. I even asked him to accompany me on one trip, but, not keen on flying in our bucket of bolts, he refused. After associating with the hard charging Poe, I thought Young's attitude strange for an American Customer, but at the time, I was not aware that Bill was not psychologically an American.

To plot straight lines, while determining headings and distances from T-516 to outlying sites, I had previously taped two overlapping maps together at a major latitude. Shuttles to sites near the Nam Ta (River) involved flying sixty miles over mostly low hilly territory that was invariably devoid of prominent landmarks. Tracking over a predetermined heading corrected for variation and wind, I was perpetually off course a few miles. ¹¹

Other pilots similarly complained about navigation problems. For the first few RONs at Chiang Khong, I thought my maps might be inaccurate, until discovering a strong magnetic anomaly present while flying northeast. For example, one day I noticed my wet compass swinging wildly thirty to fifty degrees left and right. Unless a Bermuda Triangle-like phenomenon existed, the problem tended to confirm what I had long suspected: extensive iron ore deposits lay in and under the hills. To allow for this problem and to enable a search for a friendly position if required, I ensured that I carried sufficient fuel to loiter and search for the landing zone if necessary.

¹¹ During navigation and flight over sixty miles, a one-degree compass error results in a one-mile inaccuracy.

Following the first wild night at the Bungalow, the flight time measurably increased. Besieged by heat, humidity, and fatigue, we settled down to a calmer routine.

On Tuesday, a PIC arrived with First Officer Goddard in Hotel-20 to ferry Hotel-14 back to Udorn for maintenance. Taking advantage of their presence, I solicited ten dollars from Phil and five dollars from Flight Mechanic Lazaro for the Long Tieng food fund. Retaining "Blackie" Mondello, I continued working low level, shuttling rice into LS-118 until dark. Nam Thouei was almost a direct shot to the north over hills. As I worked my fuel loads down, much to IVS worker Joe Flipse's delight, I increased the payloads to the point where I was carrying very respectable loads into the 1,900-foot ASL site.

During the RON, Bill sent me to Pa Dang, a lowland location fourteen miles south of Chiang Khong, where a long, high ridgeline soaring over the western portion of Sayaboury Province, and the Mekong River separated Thailand from Laos. The rough border area contained many different ethnic groups living on both sides of the mountain. Two conflicting Meo settlements lay on both sides. During an RLG pacification program in which FAR wanted no part, clan relatives were employed to crawl up the hill and make contact. Shouting, "*Hey mother, we are coming in to talk to you,*" the area was neutralized without shedding blood. The operation resulted in rebellious Meo terminating hostilities and returning to their brothers, uncles, fathers, and mothers. ¹²

After additional work into and out of 118, I was relieved on the second. Because of Chiang Khong's remoteness and relative aircraft inactivity, transportation to Udorn was not readily available. Consequently, I was obligated to RON in the Bungalow

¹² Bill Young Interview.

another night before deadheading home on Helio Courier B-861. I suppose I was lucky, for others were often stranded for two or three days because of a lack of transportation.

With few reservations, I considered my few days in the north excellent, especially since they afforded me time away from the increasing stresses working Long Tieng. Besides being an interesting interlude, all my human needs were adequately cared for at Young's Bungalow, and Bill seemed an enjoyable person with whom to associate. I looked forward to future RONs at the Bungalow.

Perhaps the most satisfying aspect of my monthly efforts was the three-thousand dollar paycheck I anticipated, although it was difficult to speculate how long the elevated flight time would continue. Much depended on a sustained conflict and FAR expansion continuing into areas held before the Geneva Accords were signed. As evidenced in the past, hostilities could abruptly end with a viable ceasefire. Another factor included Captain upgrading that would dilute our overall hours. However, with the recent expansion into new work areas, like Bill Young's backyard, future prospects appeared good. At any rate, I could now effectively claim bragging rights with my Dad who, only two years before, had refused to accept that I could earn such a princely sum in a month. It did seem extraordinary that I only earned 5,000 dollars during an entire year's effort in the U.S. Marine Corps, but now produced more than half that sum in one month. Even more rewarding, under the federal tax code for overseas workers, 25,000 dollars from yearly wages were tax-free for bona fide residence filers. Of course, flying hazards were deemed greater, but during any aviation pursuit, risk is an integral part of the vocation.

Although an hour faster than flying in an H-34, the two plus twenty-five hour trip home was necessarily slow and

uncomfortable sitting on the Helio's cabin deck. Some weather circumnavigation also contributed to a long journey.

Upon reaching the field, I encountered Customer Terry Burke, who was leaving shortly for Long Tieng. Terry housed his family in Udorn and, unlike his counterpart Tony Poe, who preferred life in the field, frequently ventured home. I did not know when I would return to 20A, so I handed Terry a hundred dollar check for Jim McFarland to cover our September and October portion of the food fund.

Emulating an aging politician's last hurrah, the seasonal monsoon continued to impact our area, in a somewhat tardy and unusual extent. New building projects at the Air America compound had the area in shambles. Excavations for new buildings were filled with water and the facility looked like a disaster zone.

The school also began causing Ben Moore problems. With the advent of full-time classes, fixed wing pilots, who formerly used the facility as a dormitory, had to find other accommodations. The school was very popular. It was inundated with children and even a few third country wives, hoping to listen to and upgrade their English capability. Some pilots' wives, like Deanie Estes, had been helping Joan McCasland teach, but Deanie was now sick with flu-like symptoms. Lack of help often overburdened Joan, who by most afternoons found herself a nervous wreck. Searching for more assistance, Joan enlisted Mrs. Maurine Jans, wife of the tall, gray-haired American Consul, to teach first grade. Assigned by the Bangkok American Embassy, Ralph Jans had recently arrived in Udorn to assume the position temporarily filled by Gordon Murchie during the previous six months. Ralph, a former college professor before joining the State Department, was respected and well-liked by our group. In contrast, his vinegar-tongued wife seemed a little strange. At one party at the McCaslands', she fielded a remark that shocked me, saying that someday she would meet someone who would "take her to the moon." Perhaps it was merely the booze talking that night. I was naive, but believed that even if bored and dissatisfied with her life, the wife of a civil servant should be more discrete in the presence of constituents.

Jans' office was co-located in the USIS building, where I enjoyed reading three-day-old newspapers and news magazines. I did not receive an absentee ballot until late October, and had a little trouble finding the busy man to notarize my election ballot. Not particularly enamored with either candidate, I finally opted for the underdog Goldwater. With China sneaking into the nuclear age, and anticipating a war with them within ten-years, I believed the senator might provide the strongest hammer to deter hostilities in an increasingly dangerous world.

Thanks to the heavy rains and late monsoons, part of downtown Udorn flooded. While venturing to the USIS library across from City Park to read stateside papers and publications, I observed excess water in main streets and shops. This was a first for me. Except for filled drainage ditches and a very muddy street, the Soi Wat Po area and Sopa Villa had always been spared a similar fate, thanks to my area and house being located on slightly higher terrain than the main town. Therefore, it was easy to conclude that Thai carpenters possessing stilt house building expertise were vindicated for wise construction techniques. The lengthy historical understanding of what to expect during yearly seasons had proved effective with the northeast region's local people in adapting to Mother Nature's whims. This tended to confirm the right way, wrong way, and Thai way axiom.

During wet weather, Caesar was impossible to keep clean. Seeking relief from the heat, the longhaired animal loved water and splashed in every mud puddle and klong he could find. To preclude this activity that made him look like a dirt bag, I kept him on the back porch, but I occasionally released him to exercise and perform nature's call.

The wet weather also fostered a curious phenomena. One night after dark I returned from dining at the Club to discover

a fish flopping on the raised laterite dirt ledge under the house. As this was at least one hundred feet from the nearest klong, I wondered how the creature had managed to travel there. After musing about this strange occurrence and observing well-developed lateral pectoral fins, I could only logical conclude that the fish, attracted to the security light, had walked or flown the short distance. Although this did not account for the ability to breathe out of water, I had heard vague stories of walking, air breathing fish. I also knew there were flying fish in the oceans, but on land...? Such were the mysteries and vagaries of the Far East.

Sang was still absent from Sopa Villa. I learned from the maid that she had returned briefly while I was working, but no one professed to know where she was staying. I assumed that she came to the house looking for money. She had indicated that she would be back on the 10th, but with the increased upcountry work, I could not guarantee I would at home. I also discovered that she had hocked my personal items at a government office in town reserved for such transactions. Supposedly, her son Di was staying at a friend's house. Although I obtained additional information gradually in bits and drabs, the entire situation remained an enigma.

On the Fourth, I was tapped for a short test flight in Hotel-14. Since I relinquished the machine on the 29th, it had apparently needed more than just a hundred hour inspection before being released from maintenance. Perhaps another pilot had tested it, for I spent minimum time in the cockpit.

I collected baht from Dick Elder, and even old Porter Hough, still an aspiring First Officer, contributed three dollars to the food fund. I had not been following his progress, but obviously, management still tolerated his presence.

During my time at the airfield, I learned that there were five more H-34s in Bangkok slated for transfer to our organization. Because the Thai government coveted them, or other substantial compensation, they had been sitting there since before I went on leave. If we ever received the ships, they would require another round of crew hiring.

LAO POLITICS

During early October, General Phoumi Nosavan spent two days closeted in Washington discussing Laos' problems and seeking additional aid money. He advocated a stronger policy of military action in northern Laos and interdiction of Route-7. To isolate the Pathet Lao from North Vietnamese logistical support, he proposed establishing a barrier across Route-7 east of Ban Ban. The Meo could implement this plan by either harassing guerrilla tactics or assuming a larger role involving direct military action. Such escalation would negate the Agency policy that, if pressured, to withdraw and fight another day. The general also proposed retaking Nhommarath-Mahaxay areas east of Thakhet, using tribal groups.

After analyzing Phoumi's visit and requests, the State Department concluded that the Soviets were not interested in Laos and had little influence over Pathet Lao leaders. U.S. leaders reiterated to the general that there was no change in the policy of establishing stability in the country by supporting Souvanna Phouma, and stressed continued observance of the Geneva Accords. There was nothing to gain from a military solution; a political settlement was preferable. The RLG should improve its military and consolidate control over RLG territory. Fiscal stability should be maintained to improve economic conditions, and efforts continued to strengthen government administration processes.

By 24 October, ARMA Chief, Colonel William Law, recommended tabling Phoumi's ambitious military plan. ¹

Several days before Phoumi journeyed to America, coup rumors involving General Siho's participation against the RLG rumbled through Vientiane. Overall, the situation was calm, but some factions were not happy, especially the rightists. ²

While still in Washington, Phoumi discounted political instability problems with the expiration of the Prime Minister's special powers on 7 October, and again on 14 April 1965 when the National Assembly five-year term expired. Granted, after the Geneva Accords signing, these mandates had been extended once to keep the government functioning. He was reputed to have discussed plans for a constitutional solution.

Upon the general's return to Laos, reports surfaced of a false coup plot involving Phoumi, Souvanna Phouma, and the King to solve any impending political crisis. With the consent of the three leaders, certain military officers would stage a peaceful, but rapid Vientiane seizure. This would be followed by the National Assembly's dissolution and appeal for Phoumi to form a new government. After declining, he and other coup leaders would ask Phouma to form a new government and he would accept the offer. If implemented, the plan would amount to the most expeditious Lao political solution to a problem. Nothing occurred, and the rumor was relegated to the dustbin of history. ³

¹ Telegram Secretary of Defense to CINCPAC (Sharp), 10/07/64. Rusk Telegram to Diplomatic Posts, 10/08/64.

² Leonard Unger to State, 10/02/64.

³ Leonard Unger to State, 10/02/64.
CIA Intelligence Information Cable, Field Report, 10/09/64.

Wayne Knight was enjoying life in Hong Kong with the McCaslands and Zeitlers. During Knight's absence, Abadie assumed his CPH duties at Udorn. Ab called Jack Connor, myself, and another pilot to the office and briefed us regarding a U.S. Embassy-sponsored two to three-day "show the flag" mission involving the Crown Prince, government officials, and many VIPs to newly liberated areas throughout the Vang Vieng area. Considered Pathet Lao for years, the region must have been thoroughly swept clean of enemy forces during Triangle for dignitaries of such high rank to venture there and RON. Two RLAF H-34s that Air America had previously transferred to General Ma, and recently-transitioned Lao pilots would participate. One was a Lao squadron commander we highly respected and admired. Approved and forwarded from the Vientiane Embassy, details relating to the mission were sketchy and not particularly informative, but Ab did state that those responsible had assured him that we would be well cared for, with sufficient food and lodging provided at each RON stop. However, to cover all eventualities, we wisely elected to carry a case of "C" rations and water on each ship.

Although weather reports projected wet conditions for the next few days, we launched for Wattay Airport to retrieve the VIPs and reporters representing news agencies from around the world. Then we departed for the royal capital with the Lao helicopters to board the Crown Prince and his cronies. For the rest of the day, we followed a scheduled itinerary to Phou Soung, Vang Vieng, terminating for the night at Moung Kassy. The Prince and his party were well received at each stop by local people and government officials. It did not take long for us to

discover there had been a complete breakdown in communications between the RLG, the American Embassy, and our Chief Pilot's office regarding our accommodations in the field. As suspected, during the lunch hour, we were completely ignored and left to fend for ourselves.

That night, the situation spun further south in a direction we had not considered. Without warning, the two Lao helicopters suddenly departed into the mist for Vientiane (another unknown), and the remaining dignitaries departed for a baci in the town's long house reserved for formal ceremonies. Uninvited, we opened our "C-rats" with trusty P-38s and attempted to remain dry. Over objections of security guards, I did slog over to the festivities, but received such a cold reception from everyone that I quickly retraced my steps to the Hotel-15 Sikorsky Hotel and retired for the night.

The following day proved equally damp and miserable. Flying conditions did not improve, and relations between crews and our passengers cascaded downhill. Making the rounds of small villages in the Vang Vieng area, we landed at Ban Chiang to the west. Most of the runs were of short duration and we finished the afternoon farther west of L-16 at Moung Met. I had never landed there before, and as the Lao H-34s again departed for Wattay Airport without notice, I wondered about area security. With conditions the same as before regarding crew accommodations, Connor, not prone to employing couth when dealing with people, and the other pilot angrily complained to the reporters about our plight. They should have saved their breath. If we expected any sympathy from them, especially those of the female gender, we were out of luck. Exasperated, wanting no more to do with any of the passengers or the foolish mission, the pilots retired to sulk in their respective ships. However, I was curious as to what was occurring under the large covered

pavilion, from which emanated an eerie refrain of Lao three stringed instruments. Thinking I might scrounge some rice and perhaps a beer for "C" and myself, uninvited, I trudged through puddles and thick, gooey mud toward the open-air enclosure. Eating and drinking, people sat on the dirt floor or woven rattan throw mats in rows facing the slightly elevated Prince and other dignitaries. Although I could not understand the conversation, the tone did not seem to be particularly serious, but a little solemn, especially when deferring to the Prince. Toward the front of the structure sat "fat cat" Lao, Embassy, USAID, and USIS officials wearing white shirts and ties. Protocol and a pre-established pecking order placed the journalists in the rear. Many of the attendees outwardly appeared as disheveled and disgruntled as me. Still, I suppose they felt superior to a lowly Air America pilot, and I was offered neither conversation nor food. One shivering lady, despite having her hair tied in a ponytail, looked like a wet dog. I wondered if their lot was similar to ours. Without benefit of a shave and shower for two days, I felt out of place and conspicuous. Therefore, likely quite funky, I did not remain long among the VIPs, and left without obtaining food or drink.

After a partial day of stops around the Vang Vieng area, the trip mercifully ended when we deposited our charges at Wattay Airport. Three days in the field, ignored and neglected, tended to leave a bad taste in our mouths, and reinforced our disdain for Lao royalty and elitists. It would be a pleasure to return to the real people of Laos-the Meo.

Three days after the trip Abadie asked me what happened during the mission. Apparently someone had complained about the helicopter crews' conduct. It had gone up through channels and been forwarded to the CPH office. Without really knowing, one could only surmise that it was a peeved reporter or two slighted

by a few angry words. Determined to quickly forget the episode, I had said nothing upon my return to Udorn. Now that Ab was curious, I elected to unload my unvarnished wrath regarding our treatment in the field. After saying that I never wanted to participate in another similar fiasco, I finished my invective by indicating that we would have starved without Uncle Sam's "C Rats," and personal emergency rations to sustain us. Ab listened patiently and, customarily, said nothing. I assumed he followed up on the grievance, but we heard nothing more concerning the dismal Crown Prince trip.

Some of the pilot investors in Asian American journeyed to Kuala Lumpur on STO to observe and report on the Coble cement block project. I had sent along information obtained while on leave in the States regarding the Besser machine. Concrete Masonry was not in production yet, but the first block was projected to roll off the manufacturing line by October or November. Additionally, there was another action occurring calculated to enhance Asian American's prospects.

Ever since our trip to Malaysia, Marius and I had been impressed with the developing country, and we independently considered ways to begin a business there. Both of us wanted to remain in Southeast Asia, and seeing no long-term future working in the increasingly dangerous Lao mountains, we continued to search for viable options to our present vocation. Ironically, we independently considered funding a sizeable bowling arena in Kuala Lumpur. Next, we decided on a joint effort in researching the project. The recreational craze had not yet reached Malaysia and we believed it represented an enormous profit potential, something like what had occurred in Japan. Burke agreed to write Brunswick, and I would contact the only other manufacturer of the expensive equipment, American Machine and Foundry.

REVELATION

While off the flight schedule for a week, I learned from Sang's "cousin" that all the verbiage associated with her absence had merely been a façade to obscure the fact that she had been co-habiting with someone in STARCOM. I should have expected something like that, but, like a dummy, I had been

duped into believing that she suffered from what was now obviously a fictional medical problem. Initially incensed, full of contempt for her, and for myself for being so dim-witted, I considered retribution because of the theft of my gear, but after serious contemplation rejected pursuing any police action.

Sang's untimely actions while I was away on leave insulted my manhood and considerably altered my lifestyle. Moreover, the psychological stress associated with her perfidy weighed heavily on my mind. The condition reached a crescendo one evening after return from upcountry and a boozy night in Club bar. As ground mechanic "Scotty" who lived a block away would say, I was very smoked up that evening. While gazing into the mirror set into the door of my small freestanding closet, I took exception to what I considered an ugly reflection. Becoming enraged, I cursed mightily and slammed the door. The foolish action resulted in a broken mirror, terrified neighbors, and upset my landlord. However, as a catharsis, the incident tended to decrease my emotional wounds.

I learned more about the situation when Sang eventually visited Sopa Villa to explain her absence and solicit funds. Apparently, her exploit was only a financial arrangement, as the young man had been providing her more money to exercise her addiction to the "Thai Disease." When she proudly mentioned that her young man was a U.S. Army lieutenant, I bitterly replied that I outranked the SOB. Neither of us discussed her moving back into the house or our previous arrangement. This was fine with me, for before my annual leave, the ultimate direction of our relationship had been on my mind. Increasingly she had been wrapping her female tentacles around me by bringing her boy, Di, to live in the house and creating more of a domestic base. For obvious reasons, from the beginning, I envisioned Sang as what we called a "temporary wife," never anything more. The subject

of marriage was never broached between us, and our association always included defined limits. Now trust between us was gone. Despite being at loose ends, I once again had freedom to pursue a hedonistic lifestyle if I so desired. In addition, relieved of any future domestic complications, I was now becoming accustomed to living alone again.

When I inquired about my possessions, she revealed the location in town where she had pawned my possessions. Later, for a few hundred baht, I managed to retrieve my Zenith Radio and Olympia typewriter from the government shop at a fraction of their worth. By 25 October, I was happily typing letters to the folks that were certainly a lot more readable than my illegible hand scrawl.

Before Sang left, we enjoyed a little Thai Dessert, after which, for the promise of a big red one, she agreed to stop by the house from time to time and provide me sexual favors.

INTERLUDE

Rick worked in the small STARCOM post exchange. I had previously met the friendly Filipino while purchasing the Zenith Trans-Oceanic radio. Most recently, I journeyed to the area to inquire about Sang's paramour. Discovering that I was single again, Rick invited me to his house to meet his telat and her supposedly unattached girlfriend. The girl was a lovely young thing, whom I deemed presented carnal potential. Within a short time, we consummated a physical relationship. Before long, the three friends offered me an opportunity to move in with them. However tempting the proposal, a red flag waved, for it appeared too transparent that they wanted me to share expenses and who knew what else. Manufacturing an excuse, I graciously declined, for I was comfortable where I was, and after two encounters with Thai women, loath to form any firm commitment with a female or

enter into an unknown situation, one in which I might lose control. In addition, despite the fact that I liked Rick, I did not know him well and recognized him as a potential hustler.

Instead, both girls occasionally hired a samlor to visit Sopa Villa, where I enjoyed the little brown machine's favors. Despite immature outbursts of giggling from clinical relief, the sex proved relatively uncomplicated and entirely satisfactory.

The interlude also provided its share of comic relief in a relatively sterile environment. Days were still very warm. While vigorously coupling in the standard "missionary position," our combined perspiration drained and collected in her navel. During vigorous gyrations and pelvic thrusts, suction on the delightful repository created from our pulsing, slippery bodies manifested in loud popping and slurping sounds. Punctuated with spontaneous laughter at the ridiculous sounds, the fun and games evaporated.

All good things eventually end. One day, while attending to Caesar, I heard the girls giggling in the bedroom. Curious, I opened the screen door to discover my small armoire with the broken mirror open, and the two rummaging through my small, precious store of Beanie Weenies and other canned goods I would need for upcountry purposes. It was apparent that the girls were culling items in preparation of absconding with them. Everything in the closet had been difficult to obtain and represented necessary potential survival consumables. Furthermore, I had recently experienced an unfortunate loss of what few possessions I owned, and strongly objected to the current proceeding. Increasingly, it appeared to me that Thai people could never keep their miserable hands off another's property. Angry and disgusted, I noisily ejected both females from my house, and the relationship was effectively terminated.

At this time, normally only the most senior pilots worked in Military Region Three and Military Region Four. In October, Tom Moher and Mike Marshall worked out of the Thakhet Mekong River town. Site-40 was regarded as one of the more desirable and easier areas to work. There were few high altitude landing zones, easy navigation, and usually little enemy activity in the RLA zones.

While there, an interesting incident occurred. After refueling, the thick chamois used to filter water, rust, and dirt from the drummed fuel caught fire in the cabin, possibly from static electricity. Without looking, the Flight Mechanic threw it out the door toward the tail. In typical Murphy fashion, the flaming article landed in a puddle of gasoline. All hands ran to the rear of the ship and attempted to shove the tail out of harm's way, but it would not budge because the tail wheel was locked.

Mike was on the verge of recommending they vacate the area, when Tom calmly climbed into the cockpit, activated the "T" handle, which unlocked the tail wheel-locking pin, enabling those on the ground to swing the tail away from the fire. After the fact, Mike wondered why his Flight Mechanic never thought of this, except that he was probably locked in a panic mode.

Mike was certain Tom saved the day, as he momentarily expected a huge explosion that would destroy both H-34s and kill or injure many locals. He heaped lavish praise on Moher and wrote an "atta-boy" attesting to Tom's heroic action. To his

knowledge, neither local management nor the Company acknowledged Moher's accomplishment that day. ¹

On the 18th, I was assigned to test fly Hotel-22 in preparation for a mission out of Chiang Khong. Fortunately, the current policy allowed us to check and recheck machines we were assigned to fly. To my knowledge, we were never forced to fly a ship we did not consider airworthy. A Captain's word was still honored by the Chief Pilot's office and we respected this attitude. Because of the increasing maintenance problems emerging lately, and because of an increased demand for every UH-34D, I had been very careful while testing an assigned bird. Therefore, I took pains to pour over maintenance gripes, particularly ones I had logged, to see if they had been corrected and signed off. In the haste and pressure to turn the aircraft around and return it to the field, sometimes items were ignored or suspected to be merely signed off (sometimes called pencil whipping), without proper corrective action.

To assist maintenance in repairing items, I attempted to log a perceived discrepancy with sufficient information to help analyze and fix the problem. For instance, a short remark that the aircraft had a low frequency vibration was rarely detailed enough to help ground personnel correctly evaluate a squawk. Because mechanics relied on personal experience or the maintenance manual to fix items, conditions contributing to a vibration were needed: i.e. flight configuration, speed, altitude, and payload.

Often even this information was not sufficient to correct specific items, especially radio static and whines from generators and inverters that jangled my nerves and impinged on

¹ Mike Marshall Email.
EW Knight, Email.

my ears late in the day. In addition to the frustrating annoyance, the cumulative noise tended to create fatigue. Of course, such factors only occurred with the engine running and rotors engaged. Many times dull, unimaginative radio technicians, following Company policy, checked the condition on the ramp in a static condition. After repeat gripes appeared in a logbook, with the corrective action stating "*ground checks ok,*" we began investigating and discovered a human factor.

Engine oil leaks were a constant problem, and common to the roaring, vibrating monster, R-1820 cylinders often seeped in many places. Hence, it became a battle to keep the rocker box cover bolts properly torqued. To operate in the field, we had to pay close attention to excessive leaks, and it became my policy to open both clamshell doors and check for leaks after each shut down. Some Flight Mechanics tied red wipe rags around affected parts, which led to the joke of the two or three ragger. To preclude traveling upcountry with a bad leak, before takeoff on the strip, I always performed a 360-degree hovering turn on the warm-up apron, while checking power and for petroleum leaks. This procedure paid off handsomely one morning when I discovered a large amount of black 1100-weight oil puddling on the deck beneath the helicopter that contrasted with the white concrete. I did not regret that flight delay at all.

Not long after I launched northwest, Lou and Joan McCasland were about to leave for church, when a B-Bus arrived in the compound informing Lou that he was to pack for an immediate upcountry assignment to Paksane. It would be his second trip to the area that month, the first occurring before his Hong Kong STO. The RON also marked an overnight at Tha Thom; something I believe was a first. This trip in Hotel-12 included Phil Goddard, on his next to last trip as a First Officer, and "Blackie" Mondello for what became a five-day RON.

While working around Tha Thom, with fuel capacity low, Goddard began an approach to the long grass strip at LS-11. Lou was complacent during final, as he observed Phil begin increasing RPM well above 2500. Then, as the aircraft decelerated and the RPM climbed over 2800, Lou became angry and questioned Phil why he used excessive RPM to achieve an easy roll-on landing.

After that he did not allow Phil to fly for several days, instead preferring to demonstrate, create object lessons, and teach methods of conserving power on the R-1820 engine. This included landing safely using only 2200 turns. The relatively low threat area was well suited for this task. He began hauling ten to fifteen people from an outpost on a peak surrounded by barbed wire, ditches, and minefields to the Tha Thom grass strip. After each ten mile flight, Lou commensurately increased the passenger load. During the last loads, he had "Blackie" raise the tubular seats so the passengers could stand close to one another. On the final trip, with 300 pounds of fuel, he directed Mondello to drop the electronic compartment barrier and place smaller passengers there first. Using this unconventional technique, an outstanding number of thirty nine passengers were crammed into the H-34.

McCasland brought Hotel-12 to a hover, obtained a maximum power check, landed, and then began the takeoff. He cleared the barbed wire and paralleled the slope until achieving translational lift. Not needing to obtain altitude, he noted that it required 2500 RPM and forty five inches of manifold pressure just to maintain the overloaded aircraft in level flight. He managed a smooth roll-on landing with 2500 RPM and thirty five inches MAP.

The people and troops on the ground could not believe the number of passengers departing the cabin section. In performing

this seldom-used method, Lou attempted to impress on Phil that it was not necessary to operate by overspeeding an engine.

YOUNG AND NAM YU

After arriving at the T-516 dirt landing strip with Flight Mechanic Johnny Sibal, Case Officer Bill Young climbed up the left side and entered the cockpit, wanting to recon an area to the north. I was very surprised, as during my recent RON at the Bungalow, Bill did not seem interested in flying in a helicopter, or, in fact, any aircraft. Directing me toward Nam Thouei, he explained that Site-118, nominally a refugee camp, was becoming too well known and was a hotbed for political problems. With the present and projected Houa Khong Province expansion underway, a larger, more secure, defensible area was required with the potential to build a strip long enough to accommodate C-123 traffic. In addition, there were many internal problems with Yao leadership at Nam Thouei, who, because of Thai meddling, Lao interference, opium squabbles, and other factors, were not as keen as before about prosecuting a war in the province. Young long believed that separating the civilian element from the military operation, similar to the successful one at Sam Tong and Long Tieng, would provide a palpable answer to the problems.

Many items calculated to enhance RLG, RTG, and USG goals in Laos were discussed at AB-1 and the joint American-Thai 333 detachment in Udorn. However, local planners had a tendency to table most proposals, and then suddenly resurrect one. In the case of developing Nam Yu by utilizing the same structure as Sam Tong and Long Tieng, some advisors initially questioned the wisdom of establishing an offensive military base in Houa Khong Province. It was so close to southern China, and especially the east-west "QD" (Quebec Delta) chart line, where, except for

occasional cross border operations, offensive activity was restricted. There was also reluctance over promoting another uncontrollable Vang Pao type. Despite the negative aspects, approval for a base that would be numbered and known as Lima Site-118A was eventually sanctioned.

Young, anticipating approval of the proposed base, already had a clear image of where he wanted to situate a new property. In addition, often riding a mule, IVS representative Joe Filipse hunted with the Yao throughout the area, and he duly reported his findings to Bill regarding a choice location for a new base. With the coordinates in hand, Bill and Joe overflew the area in a Helio Courier one day and liked what they observed. Located three kilometers west of Nam Thouei, the preferred site at Nam Yu consisted of a well-watered, relatively open valley, supported by high defensive ridges on the eastern side. In déjà vu mode, although located at substantially lower elevations, the two parallel sites reminded me of Sam Tong and Long Tieng in similarity and function. After circling for an extended period, and spotting some people on the ground, Bill confirmed that he was already in the process of developing the area. Satisfied about what he saw, he instructed me to retrace our heading to Chiang Khong.

PROBLEMS

That was the last time I saw Bill Young until the spring of 1967. Soon afterward, under animosity and continuing pressure from angry Thai military leaders, the Agency rotated Bill out of Thailand for a cooling off period.

Sometime earlier, Young had become enmeshed in several problems with Thai General Vitoon Yasawat (code named THEP), 333 headquarters commanding officer in Udorn. There were continuing problems with Thai PARU teams over salaries not arriving in the

field, profiteering, arms dealing, and equipment losses. In addition, though nominally in charge at Nam Thouei, the PARU team, originally consisting of only sergeants, never consulted Yao leader Chow Mai regarding civilian matters. During 1963 and 1964, the PARU exercised little sensitivity, while interfacing with various ethnic groups. Locked in a policy control mode, they merely issued orders, and expected them to be implemented without question. Therefore, a minor conflict over issues erupted every few days between the Thai and Yao. Fluent in the language, Young easily obtained specifics of the problem directly from the tribals. Since he was responsible for all northwest operations, Bill made the final decisions, something the Thai team adamantly resented.

Relations between Young and his assigned Thai PARU teams continued to sour and fester for some time. Constituting a threat to their political manipulations, Young was only considered a local boy who understood the Thai psyche. Therefore, the PARU wanted him out of the picture. With this scenario in mind, they talked to their local leader on the Lao side of the river and requested that he not include Bill in his transactions. Instead, they intended to work exclusively with him. In proposing this new working relationship, they failed to comprehend that some tribal leaders and Young were closely bonded. They had sweat, cried, and bled together for several years. Believing Young merely another meddling "round eye" farang, the Thais had little knowledge of this intimate association. Because of the Thai attempt to subvert Young, repercussions occurred. Lao Army personnel, and particularly the tribal people Young worked with, reported the Thai attempts to sabotage RLG policy in MR-1 to their Vientiane superiors. They claimed to be sabotaged by certain unnamed people because it was

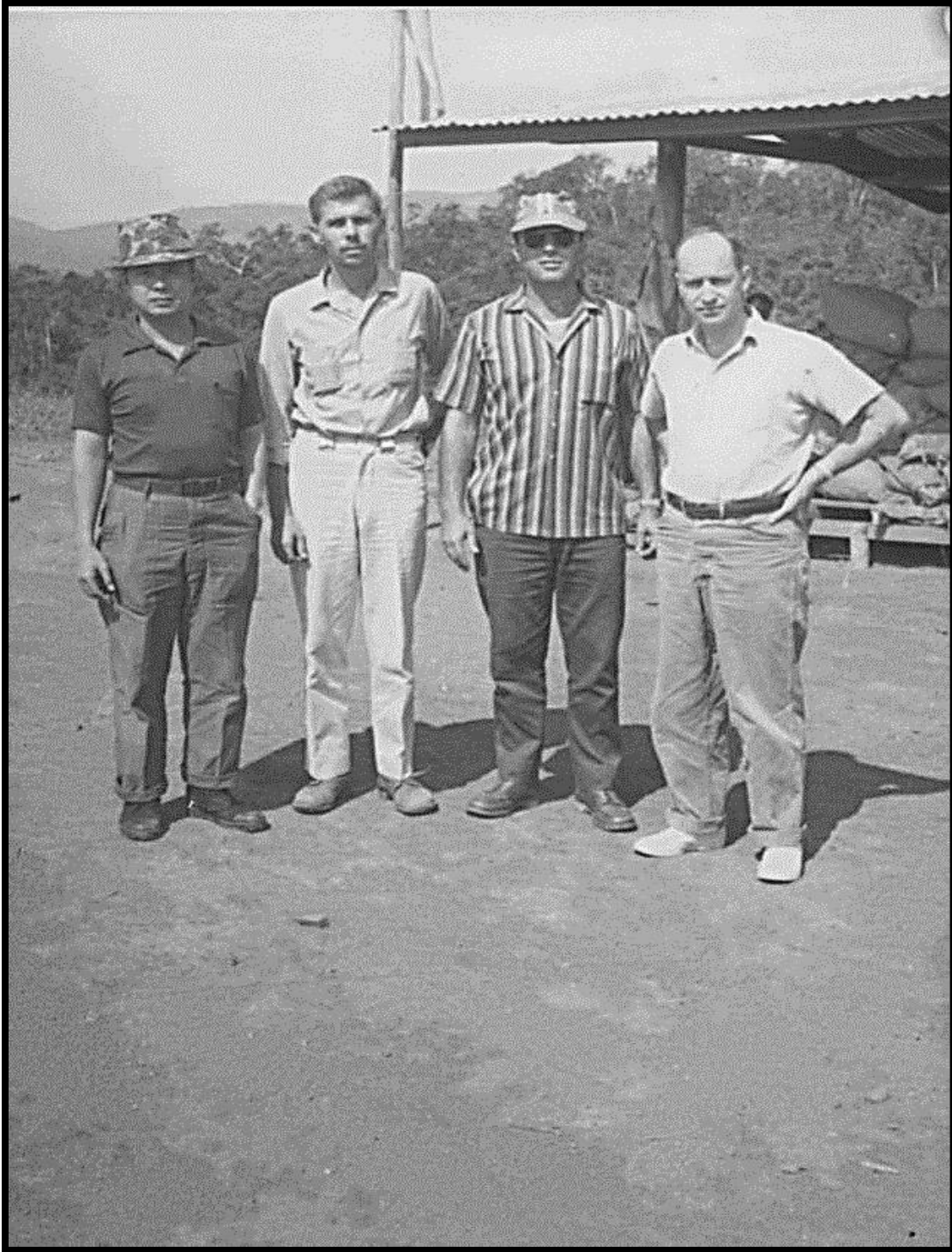
an internal item, a problem that required quick resolution. Despite this, the predicament was not immediately corrected.

One evening, because of a real or perceived slight, disgruntled Yao surrounded the Thai team's hooch at Nam Thouei. Except for one or two autocratic officers, most the team members were considered decent individuals, ones similar to Lipo, an outstanding PARU who later transferred to Military Region Two to work for Vang Pao, and was considered an especially conscientious team member. Befriending Flipse early, Lipo performed all training, while the remaining team preferred to relax in their house.

The Yao ordered the PARU team to fall out in front of the hooch and then apologize to them or else. Because of this forced action, the team leader severely lost face with his men and wanted revenge. Therefore, rationalizing the incident and looking for a likely scapegoat, he accused Young of perpetrating the confrontation.

Another incident had tended to make the Thai suspicious of Young's motives. Earlier in 1964, a company weapons pack airdrop to a Thai team supporting Meo at Ban Ya, located on the spiny border ridgeline across from and south of Pak Tha mysteriously went astray. Weapons were dropped at different coordinates well south of the targeted drop zone. The people there, perhaps Lahu, retrieved the arms and immediately vacated the area. Principals were never apprehended, nor were any weapons recovered.

Joe Flipse lounged on the Bungalow porch conversing with Young when Bill's assistant, Sam entered with a message from the radio room regarding the lost weapons. After informing his boss that the drop took place at the wrong location, Bill, as if he already was cognizant of this fact, unconcernedly said, "It was?"



Joe Flipse, second from left standing beside Agency Customer Bill Young in front of the Ban Houei Sai rice shed. AID representatives flank Joe and Bill.

Flipse Collection.

Flipse was not surprised, for by then he possessed a better understanding of Young's far flung world with ethnic tribes in Thailand and Burma. In particular, he knew there was a subtle Lahu thread woven through the fabric of Bill Young's connections. He always believed Young wore two hats, but perhaps not entirely intentionally. There were many demands fostered on him by people from the past who required assistance. Lahu leaders had been promised independence by the British in return for their withdrawal from Burma. Like so many agreements, the arrangement was never honored, and since USG was attempting to obtain Burmese governmental influence, the border tribes were largely ignored.

Several tribal villages lay along the drop zone ridgeline including Ban Mae, Ban Huai Khu, and Ban Huk Han. Half the Ban Ya strip protruded into Laos and half into Thailand. Located on top of the ridge, carved out of the terrain with a nasty dip in the center, the short strip was not favored by fixed wing pilots. Crosswinds and downdrafts also contributed to few trips to the site.

The following day, Young asked Joe to accompany a Thai Army captain, tasked by his superiors to investigate the errant drop and placate the irate team. Joe was still with IVS and it appeared that every time Sky (a euphemism reserved for the Agency) encountered a political problem, he was dispatched as the American scapegoat. Joe was impressed with the light-skinned captain who he considered an educated, quality person. He spoke English well, presented excellent bearing, and good manners, without Thai affectations. He believed the man was assigned to accomplish a very difficult mission that day.

The captain had been aware that the weapons drop was imminent. The PARU team had been in place for some time, attempting to win the people's hearts and minds. They recruited

locals for a home guard, and everyone in the area was excited about the drop. When the arms failed to materialize, the team lost face and were quite angry when the captain and Joe arrived to talk and spend the night. Much Thai chatter ensued. Except for the overall context, Flipse could not completely understand all the conversation's nuances. However, booze flowed liberally that evening, which eventually enabled the captain to smooth over the situation. It seemed the Thai were not as belligerent while boozing and suffering from a hangover. ²

Overall, Flipse considered the entire border area a distinct problem and this incident only exacerbated the situation. Ban Ya had been a particularly difficult area to pacify. Young would not chance supplying Ban Ya by air unless the situation was urgent. Therefore, in order to reach the location, the team had to boat down river and climb the ridge. The team was later extracted, for nothing tangible could be accomplished at that location at the time, or along the Sayaboury Province border to Pak Lay.

Because of sensitive border area issues and the Thai concern over status quo, there were many problems with this incident and others. Furthermore, USG was hypersensitive regarding any publicity of KMT forces located along the Thai-

² Within Agency headquarters, the issue of the bogus weapons drop remained for some time in semi-limbo. If Young was suspected of perpetrating the ruse, nothing was revealed until he returned to Ban Houie Sai to commence cross-border operations. According to Tony Poe, a person Joe Flipse did not always consider the most reliable source, after Young was discharged from the Agency, Bill was ordered back to Washington where a polygraph interrogation revealed his complicity in the case. While details are sketchy, Young, whose raging hormones were well known, was involved with a Shan "princess" in either Chiang Rai or Chiang Mai that had implications in the weapons drop. Rightly or wrongly, the Author concludes that the woman in question influenced him to drop the weapons at other than the stipulated site.

Lao-Burma border. ³ Like the situation in South Vietnam, no one in the field was particularly anxious to inform the Johnson administration what was actually occurring in Laos. People learned to present information to their superiors relating to what Washington wanted to hear, and geared proposals to that format. Consequently, frustrated field personnel recommended programs and requested needed items, only to have Vientiane rear echelon types rearrange these suggestions and forward reports to Washington according to their career aspirations. Joe sarcastically recalled that it was impossible to know how many times critical programs were rehashed on the way to the "Mr. Buck stops here." It did not make any difference which agency was involved. USAID, State, or CIA were all cut from the same cloth-USG was simply government in his opinion.

While the spurious weapons drop was still under investigation and not yet resolved, fallout escalated over the Nam Yu flap, and really precipitated Young's departure from Thailand. General THEP insisted on placing Bill under house arrest because he still resided in Chiang Khong. Consequently, there was no love lost between the two men, who developed a bitter and long-lasting hate for each other. An ultimatum was finally issued for Young's persona-non-grata status, and Bill was required to leave the country within twenty four hours. People at Nam Thouei cried like babies at a traditional going away baci arranged for him. The Chao brothers were like family to Bill, and they were highly incensed when the Thai acted unilaterally to expel him. They were still upset a year later, when Tony Po arrived to honcho operations in the northwest.

Bill Lair escorted Young to Chiang Mai to bid farewell to his family. Within seventy two hours, he was in San Francisco

³ Similar to Thai PARU personnel working in Laos, USG preferred denying KMT existence in the region.

enroute to Washington to present his explanation of the flap to superiors, and attend an extended cross border training course at the "farm." Lair always felt sorry for Young. In his estimation the young man possessed so much untapped potential. He considered Young a very special case, a person he alone knew how to motivate. As long as he could work closely with Bill, they always got along fine. However, this was not the same situation with other Americans attempting to work with him, who failed to understand his Asian mentality (especially during the early days at Padong and Pha Khao).

Presenting a temporary void in northwest Military Region One operations, a backlash soon followed in the RLA over Young's untimely departure. General Ouane Rathikoun forwarded a petition requesting Bill's return to Laos.

Until forced out by political events, Young had no desire or plans to leave Southeast Asia or his pet project. Before departing in October, anticipating an expansion in Houa Khong, Bill cheated a bit by introducing 300 Shan States Lahu from Burma to secure and start building an airstrip at Nam Yu. A group considerably more disciplined, and exhibiting better warrior potential than the Yao, his main idea was to arm and develop them into a core force, as part of a larger unit to work with other tribals. He envisioned that some day they would be allowed to return home with their weapons. Fed and housed at Nam Yu, the energetic Lahu began hacking out a rudimentary landing strip with hoes. Then a small tractor was introduced to smooth and expand the runway.

JIB

About the same period as Young's sudden departure from Thailand, Louis Ojibway, a former Ubon border police (BPP) advisor, was reassigned to Chiang Kong to oversee the Houa Khong

project. He was selected in lieu of someone like Tony Poe because of his "low key" demeanor, which AB-1 believed would be successful with the Yao. Under his tutelage, but lacking language skills and Young's rapport with tribals, Nam Yu continued slowly developing, eventually opening for business on a small scale by December. However, preferring to manage operations from the Thai side of the river, except for commuting to Nam Yu every day until the strip was completed, "Jib" rarely ventured into Laos. Filipse, who was obtaining a medical examination and making plans to depart for the States in preparation for a direct hire with USAID, missed Young's departure and rarely saw Ojibway at the Bungalow. His impression of "Jib" was that he was very quiet, perhaps with something on his mind. With Bill Taylor assuming Filipse's duties at Nam Thouei, Joe left Southeast Asia on 2 December 1964 for several months to attend advanced USAID training, including language school at Berkeley University, California.

Although the exact date is not recalled, Young must have departed Chiang Kong shortly after we reconed Nam Yu, for CPH Wayne Knight flew Hotel-21 with Joe Siaotong, a relatively new hire, younger generation Filipino Flight Mechanic to the site. RONing at T-516 and working the Nam Thouei and Xieng Lom areas for six-days to include his birthday, Wayne recalls seeing Case Officer Ojibway, but not Young. ⁴

⁴ Bill Young Interview, 10/19/95.
Joe Flipse Numerous Emails, 05/03/97, 05/04/97, 05/05/97, 05/12/97, 05/13/97 (2), 05/21/97, 05/27/97, 05/30/97, 06/02/97, 06/03/97, 06/05/97, 06/08/97, 06/10/97.
Bill Lair Interview.
EW Knight October Flight Time Record.

LP

After completing the mission out of Chiang Khong, I was directed to work at Luang Prabang. The RON there constituted a first for me.

From 15 to 31 October eleven Yankee Team reconnaissance missions were planned for Military Region One. Emphasis was placed on photographing all arteries in Phong Saly, Houa Kong, and Luang Prabang Provinces. More than likely, without our knowledge, we were positioned to the area to cover all eventualities.⁵

After the Flight Mechanic and I secured Hotel-22 for the night, Dwayne Hammer casually walked toward me. He was juggling several rare opium frog weights that he had purchased from a villager recently arrived from the northern Nam Bac area. I had not seen Dwayne in some time and, after exchanging pleasantries, he indicated that he had a short mission planned for me the following morning.

The Bailey bridge I recalled spanning the Nam Khan had recently been swept away by turbulent Nam Khan floodwaters. Therefore, Hammer and I were obligated to boat across the river to the town landing, where he had parked his USAID Jeep. It was a quaint way to travel in the "never-never land," but seemed very primitive for the ancient royal capital of Laos. It appeared that progress moved equally slow in Luang Prabang, and answers to my questions inquiring why items like bridges could not be repaired timely went unanswered. Obviously, there was no easy answer.

The town exuded the same French influence I recalled from the few visits there in the fall of 1962. Although I heard

⁵ American Embassy Vientiane, Swank, Counselor and Deputy Chief of Mission.

others talk about the town, my overnight stay at the "best" hotel in town was also a first. Located generally on a peninsula in the center of a tiny area surrounded by the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers, the concrete structure was called many names, among them the French Hotel, the Bungalow, and the Government Hotel. Managed by a Lao businessperson, the concrete structure was not luxurious, but on a par with old Thai hotels, with fans, hard mattresses, and mosquito nets in the rooms. A small restaurant rounded out the few amenities available to a Westerner. The establishment touted "French" food, mostly steak and potatoes that proved to be filling, but provided unspectacular fare.

After dinner, I wandered around the town with another pilot and met a French couple who taught at the French Academy. The chemistry was right between us and they invited us to their home for conversation. I learned several French expatriate teachers and military advisors resided in the area. When Charles deGaulle's name was mentioned, they frowned, professing to dislike the man and his policies, as did most Americans.

Anxious to begin the day, I was up early. Walking out to the wide veranda leading to the front steps, I was overwhelmed by the total silence and pleasant, crisp fall air. Moreover, I was impressed by the area's quaint, old world flavor. Continuing onto the dirt grounds near the hotel's gate, I gazed at a small caged cat. Across from the hotel, separated by a characteristic French inspired wide tree-lined boulevard, lay a venerated hilltop containing Wat Phu Si with the walls of the royal palace nearby.

Interrupting my bucolic reverie, Hammer arrived in his Jeep, and we repaired to the airfield. A short flight took us across the Mekong River to a grassy hill in Sayaboury Province, where a prosperous looking village leader dressed in western clothes appeared out of the tree line to greet Dwayne. Hammer

acted as payroll manager for this area. Suspecting the man was substantially padding the number of souls stated under his control, Dwayne wanted to count noses. The issue of phantom troops was new to me, and revealed a different side to the costs of war. When we departed, I wondered why a USAID representative was allowed to handle troop payrolls, and if Dwayne could possibly be wearing more than one hat.

As Hammer scratched his head, attempting to sort out the whys and wherefores of the phantom army across the Mekong, we departed for Long Tieng.

While Dwayne was still with IVS or on contract with AID, because there were not sufficient personnel to staff programs, he was assigned to agriculture. Veran had departed Southeast Asia and Aubrey Eliot was chief of Rural Development. The previous manager of RDD had been apprehended for carrying drugs in Saigon. His dependents were living in Bangkok and his Vietnamese girlfriend in Vientiane had asked him to carry a package to Saigon. When he arrived, the authorities were waiting for him. He never returned to Laos and there was much speculation as to who had set him up.

Hammer had a controllable form of diabetes, but the disease nearly cost him a permanent job with AID. He was in Washington for an interview. He was so excited that he neglected to take an insulin injection and went into shock in the AID office. After treatment, there was a lot of discussion regarding the ailment. The State Department made all the medical decisions. Because of his tenure in Laos and a lack of medical problems there, he was hired and allowed to return.

Dwayne worked for USAID/Agriculture, but because of his good rapport with local AID and RLG personnel, he performed other duties such as the payroll mission. He also filled in for agriculture chiefs who never journeyed to the royal capitol.

On paper, AID Ban Houei Sai was responsible to the department at Luang Prabang. However, Hammer was not concerned with this regulation, always sending supplies north that were needed ASAP. Over the years, despite the fact that someone else was nominally in charge of the office, because it was infinitely easier, Dwayne was allowed to informally administer the Luang Prabang station. He was a thorough detail man, with abundant energy, who rarely lost something through the cracks. If he indicated that he was going to send items and found he could not, he would call with an explanation. For this reason, when Joe Flipse needed something, he would call Dwayne instead of the head manager. ⁶

THE ALTERNATE

After refueling, I was surprised to see a smiling Rashan who boarded and directed me to MOUNG SOUI where, as Vang Pao's point man, he would coordinate with FAN officers, American Requirements Office Army advisors, and Royal Thai Army artillery officers regarding current policy and operations. USAID, 713, and RO agency contracts shared USG payments for air assets. Following RO requirements, USAID received work assignments from 713. USAID Sam Tong AID representatives controlled their own aircraft, but enjoyed an excellent working relationship with Long Tieng Agency people, and both shared resources on a priority basis.

I was happy to see American faces at MOUNG SOUI, as I distrusted and was still uncomfortable working for the Neuts. It was disagreeable to work for such a lazy, marginal fighting group. Their reputation as bug-outs and turncoats lingered in

⁶ Joe Flipse Email, 05/25/97.

the minds of all us helicopter pilots, an attitude that would probably never change for as long as we worked in Laos. Furthermore, after swinging back into the RLA fold, they performed nothing militarily spectacular to influence or change our thinking. Because it was part of my job, I would work with them, but my loyalty lay with Vang Pao's people, and I would never go the extra mile with the FAN that I would with the Meo. I attempted to do the best I could while working at Moung Soui and hoped there would be no incidents. Luckily, Air America management understood the problem and arranged to share the work at Site-108. Having their own agenda, American Army advisors never could understand our attitude toward the FAN. How could they? They were not present to observe Ed Shore and his Flight Mechanic taken prisoner. They did not witness Fred Riley and crew's treacherous downing on the Plain of Jars, or endure ground fire from FAN troops during humanitarian airlifts from the edge of the Plain to Site-15 and Moung Soui. In addition, from the cockpit, it was difficult to keep the various factions in perspective. Who could really distinguish a difference? All wore olive green uniforms, and, except for relatively more intelligent Thai faces, the Lao generally looked alike.

We completed the day supplying FAN outposts and forward Thai Army artillery positions, seven miles east of Moung Soui at Ban Khay, which continuously pounded the Phou Khout area.

Apparently, the barrage produced results, for a message Ambassador Unger forwarded to State on the 20th reported that artillery fire had successfully routed the enemy east of Phou Khout. Three days later, possibly to create a diversion attempt, reports emerged that the enemy had added one battalion to its forces in the Phou So-Phou Soung area, ten kilometers northwest of Moung Soui.

Unger went on to speculate that recent developments on the Plain of Jars and around Ban Tha Vieng area did not prove that the communists intended to defend the area. However, there was concern regarding a substantial increase in Route-7 vehicular movement.⁷

Except around the eastern hills of Phou Khout bordering the Plain of Jars, the local Moung Soui area was believed reasonably secure. Neutralist troops controlled the immediate low ground. To the west, Vang Pao's Meo irregulars firmly controlled the high ground at Phou So (LS-57), Phou Fa (LS-16, Agony), and Phu Fa Noi (LS-102). East of L-108, mixed ethnic villages of Nam Pit, Houei Ki Nin (LS-38), and San Luang (LS-41) tied in that sector. The sprawling Xieng Dat (LS-26) complex lay to the south. Inhabited by lowlander Lao Theung, it was long considered less secure because of intermittent wavering government loyalty over the years.

I RON in the Blue House squad bay and worked for the next two days supporting operations out of Site-20A. One evening, after transferring one hundred baht to Tony for the crippled houseboy's services, I retired early. I had just entered a light sleep phase, when I was rudely awakened by a commotion. Were we being attacked? No, it was only Jack Connor stumbling in after imbibing in the administration hooch. Mistaking Joe Marlin for his wife Marilyn, the befuddled man hopped onto Joe's cot and attempted to make love to him. Jack was an exceptionally strong man and it required several crewmembers' determined efforts to successfully drag Jack off Joe and persuade him that he was dealing with the wrong gender.

⁷ Leonard Unger to State, 10/20/64, 10/23/64.

I was assigned SAR duty at Ban Na on the morning of the 22nd. Not the Vientiane Oscar Mike's first choice, I was tapped for the duty when other pilots failed to respond. This time I was fortunate. The standby lasted only a short time and I lost very little flight time.

Turning off their radios, and the reluctance of some pilots to share and assume their standby turn, concerned and annoyed me. Granted, by this time of the month, most of us were into overtime and the loss of three to six hours meant a considerable pay difference. Despite the fact that some pilots were probably terrified at the thought of participating in a SAR, it was difficult for me to reconcile that those who continually played their dirty tricks were literally screwing their friends. How could such individuals be counted on to rescue me should the need ever arise? It was a tough question; one I hoped would never be answered.

The following morning I flew north to Houa Mounng and worked a couple of fuel loads to eastern sites for Colonel Tong until a lack of fuel forced me to return early to Long Tieng. Despite a lonely forward position designated for northern SAR standby, the site was still not adequately stocked or readily supplied with precious H-34 gasoline on a timely basis. We still lacked a reliable system to alert Vientiane operations of the fuel drum status at remote stations. Therefore, if tasked to work the site, and not fully loaded with personnel and supplies, as a precaution, we generally hoisted a couple of drums into the cabin at Site-20A. Those who were not as wise sometimes had to shut down and wait for a Helio Courier to ferry them enough juice for the return trip.

My replacement impatiently awaited me in the administration building. I had accumulated over a hundred-hours and was not surprised to be relieved.

After a short wait, the Bird pilot flying XW-PCA took me directly to Tango Zero Eight. If not flying your own helicopter, I considered such transportation a gift, for it required no transfer of luggage or the hassle to obtain another ride at Vientiane.

With little incentive to bus home early to an empty Sopa Villa, as was my custom lately, I repaired to the Club bar to partake of male conversation and solace recently found in a cool can of beer.

McMAHONISM REARS ITS UGLY HEAD

Just when it appeared our SAR work had measurably increased respect for our group, and we had begun to feel secure in our jobs and enjoy our lot, fate intervened in the form of a misguided human to change our fortunes. That evening of beer sipping was soon to be the final time any of us wearing a uniform were allowed into the Club after flight hours for some time.

Following three years with the Company, Ben Moore took advantage of the home leave policy and opted for extended vacation in his home state of Texas. I was still upcountry when his going away party was held on the 22nd. Regional Director Jack McMahon was selected to replace Ben as Base Manager. The retired Marine "Bird" Colonel, known for his infamous 1963 motorcycle/motor scooter memorandum, and most recently for an uncoordinated, botched dissemination to us regarding the joint Air Force-Air America SAR decision, was not a favorite individual around our compound. An always smiling public relations person, overtly he seemed pleasant on the exterior, but some of his subordinates found him considerably different. Perhaps because I was low man on the totem pole, we never butted heads and I never had a problem with him.

However, while a honcho at Udorn, perhaps believing he was somewhere in New York City, Jack wanted to restrict all

individuals wearing Air America uniforms from entering the Club in the evening. The true reason or reasons are lost to the obscurity of time. Granted, no one smelled too good after several days upcountry, but the Club **was built** for employee recreation and morale--**not** for some rear echelon pogue. Wayne Knight believed that Jack's main concern were greasy uniforms the mechanics wore, and not so much flight crew clothes. However, he did have a problem with crews drinking in uniform, especially if outsiders were present. This contrasted with Captain Moore, who was more liberal, and possessed a different philosophy regarding employee relations. ¹

When Jack issued his no-uniforms-in-the-Club edict, he told ACP Marius Burke to inform all the pilots and Flight Mechanics that after 1800 hours they had to go home, clean up, and change to civilian clothes if they wanted to utilize Club facilities. That went over like a lead balloon, for Marius was aware that many of us had participated in establishing the Club and actually built part of it. Recognizing Jack's enthusiasm for change a gross error, Marius attempted to dissuade the temporary manager from implementing the order. He patiently explained that crews arriving from upcountry only wanted a beer and something to eat before leaving the base. Finding a way home, cleaning up, changing clothes, and then returning to the Air America facility was totally unrealistic and unreasonable. This was especially so at a time when good food was difficult to obtain locally, employees were scattered all over town, and relied primarily on sporadic B-bus transportation. Naturally, Burke's advice was ignored and Jack's proclamation became law. Marius kept his advisement under wraps, but knew in his heart that Ben Moore

¹ EW Knight Email, 07/04/00, 05/14/01.

never would have condoned anything like this, for he would have been tarred and feathered and run out of town on a wooden rail.

It was not Marius's only unpleasant encounter with McMahon. Years later, while working in Bangkok, he had a discussion with Jack regarding post exchange (PX) privileges for Company employees. Someone informed Burke that all you had to do was ask for benefits and they would be provided. This was a hot subject, for over the years we had periodically been allowed to use the Vientiane commissary. More often, this benefit was disallowed. Patronization of the Udorn USAF facilities depended on the local commanding officer, and for reasons we could not understand, post exchange privileges were not allowed.

The retired colonel enjoyed PX-commissary privileges. During the discussion, Marius interjected that other civilian contractors were allowed everything: duty free vehicles, post exchange (PX) and commissary rights, and the like. Marius inquired why them and not us. The civilized discussion ended when Jack sarcastically remarked, *"I spent 20-years in the Corps earning those privileges. You people have done nothing."*

Colonel McMahon's statement typified Company management type attitudes. They failed to recognize that it was impossible to run an organization well from a distance, and additionally, Taipei personnel often wore blinders. Marius recalled it was exactly these negative attitudes on management's part which rank and file employees recalled in later years when forming a union.

McMahon's uniform restriction was so immensely unpopular among distressed employees that it stimulated a general meeting at the Club on the 12th. CPH Knight, who never achieved a cordial working relationship with McMahon, was consequently forced to butt heads with him over the issue. The two eventually managed to achieve a compromise. Employees could wear clean uniforms in the restaurant, but no uniforms were allowed in the

bar, and no dirty maintenance coveralls were permitted anywhere in the Club.

While I was still sucking the suds, Elder stopped in the bar and solicited 700-baht from me to buy a case of scotch to reward General Kham Khong's generous hospitality in accommodating our overnight crews at Paksane. Having just collected 800-baht from Art White and Mike Marshall for two months, I was able to immediately oblige Dick's request. The following day, I collected from Weitz and Goddard, who were about to embark upcountry for Long Tieng. Before he left, I gave Charlie a hundred dollar check for Jim MacFarlane to cover our portion of the food fund.

UHRIG

Colonel Uhrig was perhaps the number three man in the Deputy Chief pecking order in the Bangkok-based JUSMAG-Thai organization. Access to commissary goods was contained in the contract when Dick Elder became Club Manager, but through his friendship with Ben Moore, Uhrig smoothed the flow of supplies, obtained monies for bar expansion, and additional power lines to the Club. Moreover, some individuals believed the colonel was instrumental in more far reaching matters than we realized.

Before Ben Moore departed on extended home leave, Elder approached me with a surprising and distasteful request. USAF Colonel Uhrig was arriving shortly on a quick trip to Udorn. Of average height and weight, with steel-gray hair crew-cut, wearing Ray Ban glasses with clear lenses, the Colonel was a good friend and consummate drinking friend of Moore. For this, and because he was instrumental in the Club Manager's access to military facilities like the Bangkok commissary, Ben, in what seemed slightly out of character for him, wanted to show Uhrig a good time complete with local female talent. For some reason,

perhaps because I was a bachelor, I was tapped to provide the female company.

Uhrig tended to elicit a randy nature at times. Charlie Weitz had organized a drinking affair at Max's bar on Patpong Road in Bangkok, which the colonel attended. During the course of their fun, Charlie bet Uhrig one hundred baht that his personal turkey gobbler was definitely superior, and provided a service like the colonel had never previously experienced. After accepting the bet, Charlie sent Sam, his standby taxi driver when on STO, to bring the lady to the establishment. Uhrig then escorted her to a room. He returned after a time and without further comment, dropped a big red one at Charlie's feet. ²

I had previously met the outgoing, engaging Uhrig on one of his frequent visits to our facility. He was the type who enjoyed conversing with underlings and struck me as a genuine person. However, I was reluctant to comply with Elder's request for a couple of reasons. Because of extensive work requirements and the departure of Sang, I had largely been out of circulation for two months. I had only lately begun going down town to test the waters, and reestablish contact with the bevy of expanding females available on the local meat market. Another reason for my discomfort was that the request smacked of pimping, certainly not one of my vocations. It was highly embarrassing and I felt pressured to perform a task I believed demeaning.

Dick, as always, was a very persuasive person with his arguments. He mentioned that Uhrig had been a consistent friend to us, instrumental in obtaining foodstuffs and booze for the Country Store and so forth. As my conversation proceeded with Dick, it appeared that I would be disloyal to my peers if I did

² EW Knight, Emails, 06/15/00, 06/18/00, 03/26/01, 09/06/01.
Dick Elder Email, 09/05/01.

not adhere to his wishes. In the end, I agreed to attempt procuring a suitable paramour for the horny colonel.

The next phase of the project posed a dilemma. The girl could not be any diseased bimbo. *Where would I go? Whom would I select?* Then, with all options almost exhausted, I recalled the cute Beanie Weenie girl I had recently ejected from Sopa Villa for attempting to purloin canned goods from my closet. If willing, she might please the colonel.

Fortunately, she was home. I suavely explained the situation to her and inquired if she could spend some time with Uhrig. I indicated that he was quite generous and she might be the proud recipient of a hundred baht note. It did not take much convincing and she agreed to the liaison. I thought that was easy and asked her to meet us in front of the Jute Box exactly at 1900 hours.

Later, with Elder and the well-oiled Moore and Uhrig in tow, I sheepishly led them to the appointed place. After glowingly describing her succulent attributes, the girl failed to appear. Aware that Thais are notoriously late for appointments even on good days, we waited impatiently until I realized she was going to be a no show. Forgetting that Thai people were reluctant to say no and would say yes to almost anything, I really looked bad. Therefore, out of embarrassment and desperation, I entered "the Box." There, while extolling the virtues of baht, I hurriedly convinced an older, but popular girl to assume the duty as the colonel's evening escort. She was not high on my lovelies list, but available and not too bad looking in subdued light. I only hoped she was disease free, but that was not really my problem.

We stepped outside into the semi-darkness and conducted introductions under the lone, dim street light. There was instant reaction and no hesitation on the old boy's part.

Apparently, he was more than primed for fun and games, and being a good sport, he grinned and readily accepted the Plan B situation at face value. With a twinkle in his eye, he talked quietly with her for a short while. Apparently, chemistry and negotiations gelled between the two, or the colonel's level of sobriety was low, for they soon disappeared into the night.

We split up, and everyone except me seemed happy and satisfied. There was no critique on what transpired that night. Afterward, I angrily told Elder that he was never to ask me to do such a thing again. I emphasized that I was not a pimp and questioned why I was called upon for the task. Dick, always armed with a suitable repartee for any situation, mockingly drew back and contritely said he thought, as a bachelor, I knew all the ins and outs of Udorn town. Fortunately, that marked the final time anyone asked me to procure a honey.

MARSHALL DEPARTS THE COMPANY

After flying seventy five hours in October, Mike Marshall, Kay, and Neal departed Air America. Nothing out of the ordinary occurred during the month that precipitated his leaving. However, for some time, projecting that it should have been him in the weeds instead of Bill Zeitler, the implications of the Zeitler incident had been steadily eating at him. In addition, following his July incident, believing he was eventually going to "buy the farm," he was paranoid and very jumpy while flying upcountry. To cap it all off, Kay constantly bugged him to leave. Consequently, he found that flying and living in Southeast Asia was not fun anymore.

All these factors had impinged on him psychologically for months. He could not concentrate on the job and other important aspects in his life, He developed the often quoted "fifty yard stare" associated with combat veterans who thought they were

going to die. One night, when we were all very tired, Mike overindulged in the bar, then went to Abadie's office and informed him that he was going home.

Relieved to be departing the source of so much pain, the Marshalls departed Udorn the last week in October. After enjoying a few days in Bangkok, they flew to Hong Kong, where Kay and Neil remained while Mike continued to Taipei for the obligatory Company termination process. Completing paperwork that indicated a forwarding address, he dealt only with a secretary. There were no secrecy forms to sign, interviews with management, or even a small thank you for his efforts.

The family returned to Hurst, Texas, with 30,000 dollars in the bank, and considered themselves wealthy. ³ Mike paid for all purchased items with cash. He bought a new Chevy Malibu for 2,200 dollars and had a nice house built in Hurst for 25,000 dollars in 1968. However, he lost a great deal of money during the 1973-1974 stock market decline.

After arriving home, not unlike what other pilots had experienced, Mike's psychological problems increased. Unable to forget unpleasant incidents he had endured in Laos, he was badly depressed for almost two years. ⁴

Mike went to Fort Rucker, Alabama, to work for Ross Aviation teaching Army candidates to fly helicopters. However, he continued to suffer mental and emotional problems. While there, he even contemplated suicide. Later, without benefit of medical assistance, while working for Los Angeles Airlines, he finally worked his way out of the torturous psychological miasma

³ That amount of money was a tidy sum at a time of benevolent inflation that spilled over from the Eisenhower years, and before inflationary pressures from LBJ's "guns and butter" ruse during the Vietnam War took root. Unfortunately, many others like Mike had joined Air America with no funds, and left with next to nothing.

⁴ The post-traumatic stress syndrome term-PTS-was still unknown or voiced in medical circles at this time.

hanging over him. Many years later, after confiding and discussing the problem with his cousin, a doctor, Mike learned that he had probably been close to a complete nervous breakdown.

Despite the enduring mental stress he incurred flying upcountry, in retrospect, many times Marshall regretted leaving Air America. He believes that if the Company had acceded to his request, he would have opted to fly the Helio Courier.⁵

While Air America was still hiring, he reapplied for a helicopter job in 1966, but someone in management rejected his request.

Despite all the baggage he carried with him, when all the bad memories subsided, Marshall considered his Air America experience a remarkable, one-of-a-kind adventure, and claims that he has never lived as intensely and fully since. He admitted that if he had not been frequently lost, it would have been even more satisfying.⁶

Mike enjoyed sitting in the Long Tieng hooch at night drinking while Tony Poe expounded on his war experiences. He loved loading the aircraft to the gunwales and performing a heavy rolling takeoff. He took pride in landing and departing landing pads that other pilots refused. One particularly nasty day, Poe asked Mike how he had landed in the fog. Mike joked that it was all in the wrist action, and was unhappy that Poe would not let him depart again. He enjoyed associating with older pilots who had flown throughout the world, but he always feared the ultimate result of remaining too long in the bush:

⁵ However, despite other requests, only a few H-34 line pilots were allowed such a transition.

⁶ Mike Marshall was renowned for often being lost. The terms grand experience and adventure appear as a common thread among nearly all former Air America helicopter and many fixed wing pilots.

that of a flying bum. He loved the bums, but did not want to subject his family to a similar life. ⁷

TIME OFF

About the time Mike departed Udorn, I wrote a letter home on my recovered typewriter. In a letter dated 14 October, Mom sent me a newspaper clipping regarding Bill Zeitler's downing and rescue. I filled them in with between-the-lines details, as related to me by Bill when I returned from home leave. I added that despite his wounds, he was ambulatory and flying once again.

The correspondence triggered my inner most thoughts, and probably other views and insights regarding the rescue business. Without divulging much classified information, I wrote that I liked my job, but definitely not SAR commitments, for they invariably occurred in areas highly dangerous to our crews and our slow moving helicopters. The recent promise of air cover provided no firm guarantee of success or our immortality. In the end, if the situation ever arose on my watch, given the facts available, it would be my decision whether to launch or not. Then, on a subject that grated us, I mentioned that we often had to standby at sites for several hours to cover possible rescue missions into enemy territory. To give them the full picture involved in contractual SAR work, I explained that we were not

⁷ After Marshall departed Air America, stress levels and job difficulties continued to spiral upward for at least another year. Following that period, depending on the military situation, the degree of difficulty waxed and waned until we departed the Lao theater in 1974. I am sure at least latent PTS remains with some individuals today, perhaps in all of us, and will plague us to the grave.

paid for this extra hazardous duty, although we suspected the Company was remunerated for our efforts. ⁸

Still angry over the McMahon technique of assigning us initial SAR duty in Laos, I ended this portion of the letter with a bitter, derogatory comment about upper management's veracity in handling these matters.

Long before, I had decided to attempt growing tomatoes as a diversion from job anxiety. My mother forwarded a packet of seeds through the APO mail system. Since Udorn soil was not friable, nutrient deficient, and had a high salt content, I decided to plant the seeds in a box. The underprivileged neighbors living to the Villa's right side raised pigs under their deplorable shack, so I solicited some feces to enrich my soil. While opening the Burpee packet, I carelessly spilled half on the floor, but managed to salvage enough to start my small garden. I tended the seeds for a time, but they all failed to sprout. It was a disappointment. Perhaps it was too late in the season, but more likely, the soil was overly rich, which burned up the seeds.

An interesting episode developed from operation tomato. A teenage female lived next door with the hogs. In passing, I noticed that she was not bad looking, and, like most Thai females, rather shapely in her body clinging sarong. Although she sashayed around the neighborhood, often looking toward my house, I paid little attention to her. She or the family must have known I lived alone. Within a month, when Buddy was visiting, smiling in a quiet, confidential manner and pointing to the girl, he informed me that the sweet young thing,

⁸ This was an unsubstantiated rumor at the time. Although we worked under the auspices of USAF contracts, and it was entirely possible SAR funding was provided, no evidence of this has ever surfaced.

conveniently, coquettishly, and provocatively positioned outside the gate, wanted to "play." What? Play? That sounded quite graphic and open to interpretation. Although flattered, I considered this an invitation for disaster and wisely declined the offer. More aware regarding the Thai-Lao culture, I realized that an intimate relationship with someone who lived so close to me would open the door to many unwanted demands from relatives, and perhaps trigger a visit from local authorities.

DAY TRIP

Consistent with local management's attempt to equalize monthly flight time, I was scheduled for a day trip to the Vang Vieng-Moung Kassy area, where Rightist and Neutralist troops continued mop-up operations to the west against Pathet Lao. Over time several hundred Pathet Lao, suffering from shortages of military and food supplies, defected to government forces.⁹

I stopped at Wattay Airport, obtained a current briefing on the area from FIC, and delivered VIPs and other personnel to Lima-16.

Along with a side trip to Moung Met, I spent a great deal of time retrieving and backhauling enemy weapons discovered in the valley. One load included crates of old trinitrotoluene (TNT) just discovered in a pit. Having prepared a fuse and exploded a half pound of TNT at Officer's Basic School at Quantico, I knew a little about the substance. Normally, fresh TNT is a very stable compound with a distinctive sweet odor. It will not explode without benefit of shock from a blasting cap. The substance can even be burned without danger. However, the unwrapped TNT brought to the cabin door of Hotel-20 was discolored, and dark brown from age, after being exposed to the

⁹ CIA Daily Brief, 10/01/64.

elements. Just looking at the explosive gave me pause for concern. After being buried for so long in the soil, I knew the chemical and molecular structure had changed; it did not even smell right.¹⁰ Certainly unstable and dangerous, under the right conditions, it could readily explode. Consequently, I told Johnny Sibal to make sure the loaders were extra careful placing the volatile blocks onboard. Fortunately, there was no incident.

Thus far, during the Lao conflict, I had not been overly acquisitive collecting native artifacts or weapons of war. Much of this stemmed from the unsecure conditions I lived under in Udorn and the renowned Thai sticky finger. There was also a question of how long the job with Air America would last. At any time, contesting factions could come to an agreement and place our helicopter program on hold again, so I did not want the burden of extra possessions.

However, despite their condition, seeing many weapons wetted my appetite for one. Late in the day, I settled on a partially rusted compact French tanker automatic gun. The 9mm, MAT-49 submachine gun was unique in that it had a telescoping wire stock and a magazine that folded under the piece. Another souvenir I took home was a deactivated commie mine. It looked much like our serrated hand grenade, only much larger and was painted black. It made a dandy paperweight. I later gave the French gun to a CID agent who was investigating a pilot's wife for possible family communist ties.

¹⁰ A block of Trinitrotoluene (TNT) normally exuded a sweet candy-like odor.

During July, USG military leaders began to consider various methods of interdicting the Ho Chi Minh Trail system. The potential use of Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) A-1Hs was discouraged by the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane, for it was politically unpopular with the Royal Lao Government, and did not involve addressing major problems in Military Region Two.

By 18 August, a high level Southeast Asia conference was held in Udorn to consider revamped plans to use Lao T-28s rather than VNAF A-1Hs for bombing communist logistical routes running through the Lao Panhandle into South Vietnam. The exalted titles of attendees attested to the importance of the meeting: representatives from Vientiane included Ambassador Unger, Colonels Tyrrell and Law from AIRA, ARMA, and the Chief of Station; from Bangkok, Ambassador Martin, General Easterbrook JUSMAAG Chief, Colonel McCoskrie, and the embassy's political counselor; and from Saigon, Ambassador Maxwell Taylor, U. Alexis Johnson, William Sullivan, General Westmoreland, and the COS.

Prior to the meeting, an enthusiastic RLAFF General Thao Ma assured General Westmoreland that his pilots could destroy preselected targets during a ten day period using the ten T-28s based at Savannakhet.

An 11 September meeting in Saigon authorized and tweaked plans formulated to interdict the trails. The T-28 bombing list was modified to include less dangerous targets, with the more difficult ones reserved for Yankee Team assets. The main goal of the strike missions was to be psychological.

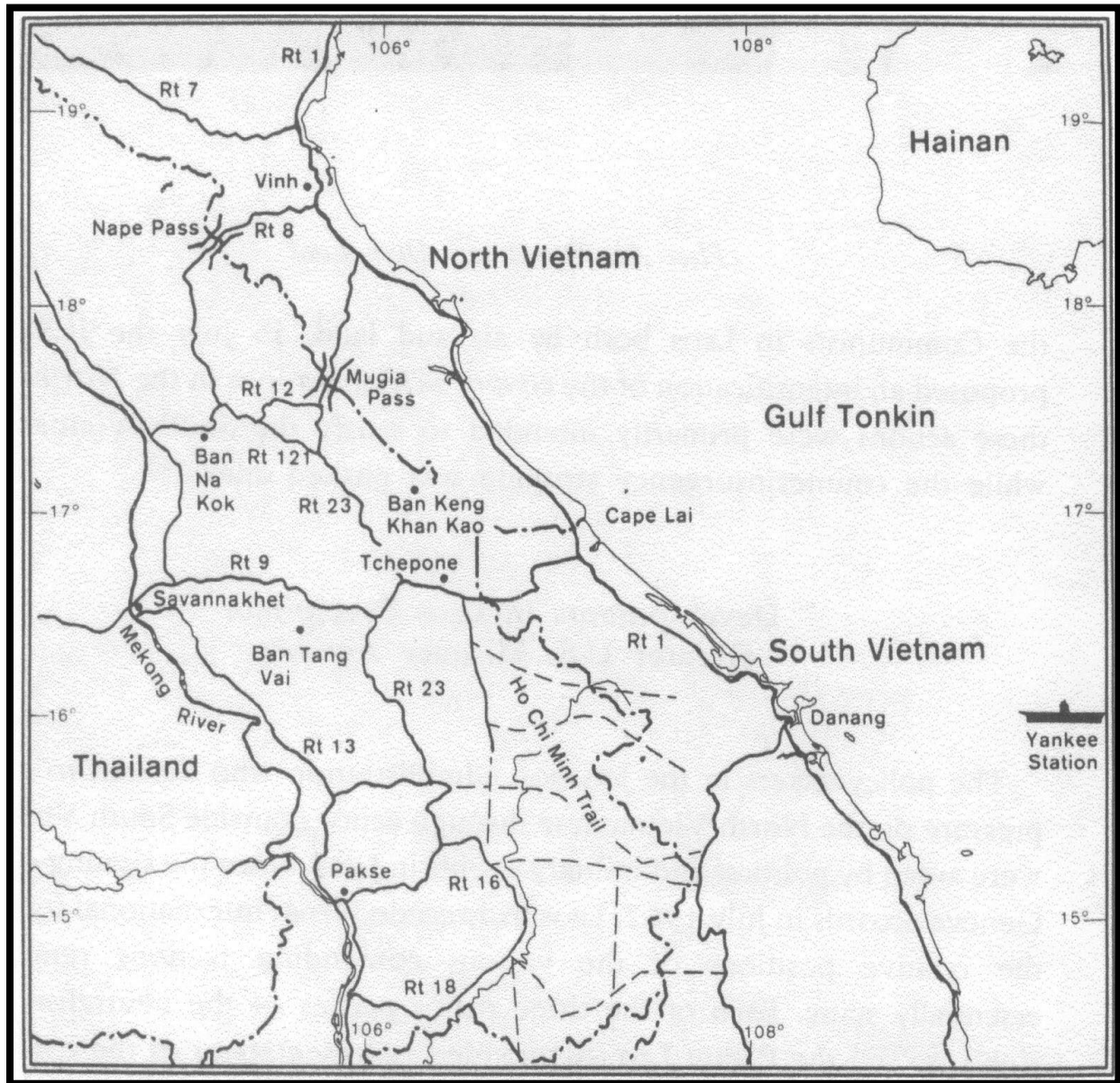
October marked the inauguration of a joint U.S. Lao bombing campaign to discourage Vietnamese passage of men and materiel to

South Vietnam through Annamite mountain passes at Mugia, Nape, and Ban Karai in eastern Laos. It was also a time when both contesting parties greatly escalated clandestine operations. Under the cover of dense jungle and remote trails, tactical Vietnamese units began marching south in earnest over ancient, rudimentary Lao trail complexes. In addition, USG continued to support various groups and agencies working under clandestine OPLAN-34A guidelines. Approved by LBJ in January, the plan was multi-faceted, calculated to increase the cost to the North in men and materiel, should North Vietnamese leaders continue to aid and abet the war in the South.

Long under consideration in Washington, on 25 September, intending to thwart enemy movement into South Vietnam, State authorized Unger to explore with RLG leaders the immediate commencement of T-28 strikes along the eastern corridor. Five days later, the embassy reported Souvanna's positive response to implement these air strikes. Unger also inquired about the Prime Minister's pet subject: interdiction of Route-7 in Military Region Two, in lieu of the trails.

A preliminary target list deemed suitable for the slow moving T-28s was formulated for air strikes. Unger forwarded a disclaimer with the message that such action would most likely promote serious enemy responses and escalate U.S. participation in Laos.

From the Pentagon, the Joint Chiefs of Staff provided their views on air strikes and cross-border ground operations in the Lao corridor between Laos, North Vietnam, and South Vietnam. USAF and USMC chiefs believed the ultimate answer to curtailing enemy supply movement was to strike at the head of the snake: the North. However, recognizing that this would be unpopular within the pragmatic and cautious LBJ administration, the



Map depicting the location of the Nape and Mugia passes leading into Laos and the Ho Chi Minh Trail system.

obvious solution was tabled until the following year. Instead, they addressed the current task at hand, recommending that Panhandle targets be struck by T-28 pilots and U.S. planes using Yankee Team cover. The USAF would strike the more difficult targets, and conduct flack-suppression missions for the RLAF.

For some time, with assent from the Thai government, USG prepared and geared up RTAF bases for the expected escalation. By October, after work was largely completed on the Udorn airstrip, the 333rd Air Base Squadron was permanently assigned to the facility. The photo recon squadron was subordinate to the 35th Tactical Group located at Don Muang, which provided TDY support personnel before formation of the official squadron.

Activation of a Udorn squadron was deemed necessary because of expanding Air Force requirements, augmented personnel, and increased base support needs. Before the group was activated, permanent personnel filtered in to replace those on temporary duty.

From Bangkok, Ambassador Martin forwarded abbreviated guidelines to State for utilizing Thailand-based USAF aircraft. They included Lao photo reconnaissance, armed escort, suppressive fire required for SAR in Laos, defense of Thai airspace with hot pursuit over neighboring borders authorized, and, in the event of Chinese intervention, all use of Thai-based assets.

During top level meetings held in Washington with LBJ, Administration Secretaries Rusk and McNamara, advisor Bundy, and CIA Director McCone participating, principals agreed to a logistics and communication corridor program to bomb enemy interdiction routes and hard facilities. Commencing ASAP, available T-28 assets would be used, with later use of Yankee Team planes anticipated. Heeding Unger's cautionary notes, LBJ initially banned USAF strikes, cover, and cross-border

operations from South Vietnam into Laos. Souvanna Phouma's request for interdiction along Route-7 (to discourage the enemy from pushing south toward Vientiane) was also squelched. Curiously, USG wanted to negate any impression that it was initiating Lao escalation, and would reconsider action along Route-7 should evidence surface of preparations for attacks on the Plain of Jars. To pacify the RLG hawks, over flights of the road would be implemented by T-28s, and additional Yankee Team reconnaissance to monitor Pathet Lao movement, air defenses, and lucrative targets.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff did not overlook Souvanna Phouma's concerns about an expected major Pathet Lao October offensive. In addition, the U.S. Intelligence Board believed the communists would react strongly to RLA's recent military successes, and Prince Souphanouvong's failure to gain concessions from Souvanna during the Paris conference.

In a later memorandum to the Secretary of Defense, U.S. military leaders stated that USG should grant the Prime Minister immediate military support to preclude the enemy from launching a new offensive, which Lao forces would be unable to resist. All major supply arteries-Routes-6, 7, 8, and 12-from North Vietnam into Laos should be interdicted and strikes commenced against enemy forces. They added, timely U.S. strikes would help resist enemy action, and convey to all concerned that USG was willing to assist those resisting communist aggression. Approval for the response should include authority to utilize Thailand-based assets.

On the 7 October, State forwarded Unger authorization to proceed with plans encouraging RLG to begin strikes immediately in the Panhandle region. Yankee Team support, although anticipated as part of the overall operation, was not yet authorized.

Vientiane Embassy and AIRA targeting was further refined and forwarded to Washington over the period of a week. Beginning on 14 October, weather permitting, thirteen targets were proposed for attack over an eight-day period. They included two objectives west of Mugia Pass and the Tchepone barracks complex. U.S. air cover was believed necessary for strikes closer to the North Vietnamese border, and a request was made for Yankee Team aircraft to hit four heavily defended targets around the Nape Bridge crossing.

Lao planners considered the Mugia Station supply point the highest priority, but American intelligence sources indicated that it was within North Vietnam. In the end, only a small portion of targeting considered for T-28 resources was approved, and two areas in or around Mugia Pass were deemed too close to the border.

Embassy staffers considered air operations in the Lao corridor essential because of the importance to the military effort in South Vietnam, at a time of a badly deteriorating situation. Making a last minute pitch for U.S. air support, AIRA emphasized that failure to assist the RLAF might result in unacceptable losses to the unit. U.S. participation in the operation was paramount to success.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff agreed, recommending high cover as required by the RLAF, U.S. strikes on targets beyond RLAF capability, U.S. flak suppression for T-28 strikes, SAR resources, and air defense operations.

With representatives from the Second Air Division, MACV, Vientiane Embassy, and the Seventh Fleet attending, a final meeting regarding the Panhandle air campaign took place at MACV Headquarters on the Ninth. AIRA Vientiane indicated the RLAF would strike thirteen targets, including Mugia on the 14th. This would be accomplished regardless of whether USG provided CAP or

Yankee Team strikes. Furthermore, launch of U.S. jets from Thailand or South Vietnam in support of SAR operations or air defense requirements in accordance with (IAW), the new rules of engagement (ROE) was sanctioned.

Panhandle strikes commenced on 14 October. This marked a development that forever changed the war's complicated nature and Air America's involvement. Following considerable political pressure, Washington authorized Yankee Team AF F-100s from Da Nang air base to fly cover missions with the RLAF T-28s, to protect them from an intrusion of communist MiG aircraft.

Departing Savanakhet's macadam-topped airstrip, General Ma led the first flight of four T-28s against a military storage area six-miles south of Mugia. Subsequent sorties consisting of seven planes pounded buildings in the Mugia Station perimeter. Pilots claimed ninety five percent of the targets destroyed. An Air Force RF-100, photo reconnaissance Voodoo was used to record bomb damage assessment (BDA), but because of marginal weather, initial reports were confused as to the actual damage.

Foul weather and distance hindered concentrated efforts against enemy targets. For an increased and efficient radius of action in striking two southern targets, General Ma transferred six T-28s to Pakse on the 18th. By the following day, only five of the original thirteen targets had been hit. Overall, using twelve aircraft, RLAF pilots conducted intermittent operations that between 14 October and 2 November targeted all thirteen MACV-selected supply, military areas, huts, buildings, road junctions, bridges, and Nape Pass. The number of targets swelled with the addition of three chosen by Ma's people. Overall, the pilots' optimistic reports of their bombing sorties were not verifiable by USAF recce planes because of marginal weather. Prior to initial strikes, storage areas and supply points were never camouflaged. Soon afterward, anticipating continuing

strikes, camouflage was employed and supplies were moved and concealed in jungle terrain.

Air America participated in the fledgling operation. Responding to an Air Force request, CPH Wayne Knight flew three hours in a HU-16B as an observer in the Panhandle area. Nothing occurred on his watch, but he noted that there was extraordinary secrecy attached to the early bombing and SAR coverage. Both he and Scratch Kanach flew on one or more of these flights over the next year.

From the start of the operation, AIRA Captain Randle was assigned to Savannakhet to monitor the code-named Flaming Arrow attacks on the Ho Chi Minh Trails. He noted that after two weeks, the operation simply wound down.

A lack of pilots prompted the RLAF to augment their mission with Thai pilots from the Udorn squadron. On the 28th, absent good knowledge of the area and coordination, ten T-28 pilots enthusiastically bombed and strafed "enemy" villages in the Mugia Pass area. USG denied the resulting public clamor from Vietnamese communists that U.S. Naval planes had participated in an attack on North Vietnam. On the same day, Ma's unit bombed Mu Gia again with unsatisfactory results. The pilots planned to re-strike the same area that afternoon, but because of the Thai error in attacking civilian villages, AIRA attempted to curtail the strike.

Insufficient T-28 numbers slowed the Panhandle operation. The RLAF had thirteen planes at Savanakhet and eighteen at Udorn, but not all were configured for interdiction. Therefore, on Unger's recommendation to increase the force, Rusk ordered twelve additional T-28s from VNAF.

Victorious Arrow, a Military Region Three FAR ground-clearing operation, commenced toward the end of the bombing period, with the goal of capturing Moug Phine and Tchepone. The

operation failed when supporting troops, supposedly moving west from South Vietnam toward the objectives, failed to participate.

Of course, word of Panhandle bombing eventually leaked to the American news media. This might have forced the Johnson Administration into an official admission of USG activities, in violation of the Geneva Accords, which damaged the Soviet-American agreement on Lao neutrality that President John F. Kennedy and Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev reached during their 1961 Vienna meeting.

The main concern of Kremlin leaders was to prevent Chinese hegemony over communist movements in Southeast Asia, particularly the Vietnamese. This was likely the reason why the new leadership that replaced Khrushchev in mid-October after ten years in office, reversed his policy to disengage from Indochina. In addition, the People's Republic of China successful testing of its first atom bomb in October created an conundrum with the Soviets, as it was in the rest of the world.

Furthermore, official confirmation of USG participation in Laos might have edged the USSR in the direction already taken by the North Vietnamese and the Chinese, who signified disapproval of Souvanna's government by withdrawing their ambassadors from Vientiane. In addition, to reinforce their argument, the Geneva Accords were not being honored; they ceased making payments toward the upkeep of the ICC after 1963.

All these items eventually led to Soviet-American relations in which the Russians overlooked non-public USG Accord violations, while the Americans did the same for Soviet arms

deliveries to North Vietnam. ¹

FUTURE PLANS

Since losing the Plain of Jars earlier in May, the RLG, with the assistance of T-28 bombing, had regained 2,000 square miles around the Route-13/7 road junction. After the overwhelming success of Operation Triangle, the road leading to the Plain was nearly cleared of enemy. In the Tha Thom area, 350 square miles were purged, with 500 communist troops defecting to the RLG.

Six-month plans to extend gains further into Military Region Two enemy territory following Triangle began during the fourth week of October. Despite enemy reinforcement northeast of Moung Soui and increased strength around Phou Khout and Moung Phanh, the FAR commanding officer boasted that he would take the

¹ Sources used for this segment:
 Victor Anthony, 137-138.
 Meeting President Johnson, McNamara, Rusk, Bundy, McCone.
The Thailand Bases: Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base (13th USAF Office of History, 12 August 1976.).
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 John Pratt, *CHECO*, 17.
 Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction in Southern Laos*, 38-40.
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 Joint State-Defense Message (Viking, 1984) 178-79.
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 Memorandum JCS-McNamara 10/13/64.
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 Memorandum Director Defense Intelligence Agency (Carroll-McNamara), Corridor Interdiction in Lao Panhandle, 10/19/64.
 EW Knight, Emails, 04/30/00, 05/01/00, 03/31/01.
 Leonard Unger-State, 10/28/64, Unger-State 10/29/64, *Interdiction*, 39-40.
 Arthur Dommen, *Conflict in Laos: The Politics of Neutralization*, 305-06.
 Foreign Relations.
 John Smith, *Rolling Thunder: The Strategic Bombing Campaign North Vietnam 1965-1968* (Saint Paul, 1995), 26.

hills. Although having heard an identical prediction several times previously, without results, ARMA, cognizant of the value in seizing the strategic area, gave its blessing to such a goal. By the second week of November, there were no significant operations commenced around Moung Soui.

On 23 October, Meo roadwatch teams reported that since the thirteenth 250 trucks had passed their observation post below Route-7. It was obvious that the enemy was blatantly reinforcing and resupplying positions on the Plain of Jars and around Tha Thom. To counter the movement, AIRA wanted T-28s to crater the road and direct Meo guerrillas to seed the road with mines. A far more ambitious plan recommending another air strike on the Ban Ken Bridge was denied.

By 27 October, the FAR general staff's final touches involving an overlay for the Operation Victorious Anniversary offensive was ready for dissemination to field commanders. Along with T-28 tactical support, the offensive was designed to clear or capture enemy strong points in Xieng Khouang Province along Route-4, and in former historic RLG areas north of Tha Thom and beyond. Ten mixed FAR-Meo government battalions would face eight enemy battalions.

D-day was planned for the 30th. RLA units from GM-13 would simultaneously hit Moung Ngam (LS-63), located in a sizeable valley twelve miles east of Tha Thom. Further west, other units would strike Ban Om, Phak He, and Boua Kong, all located eight to ten miles north or northeast of Meo site Ban Peung (LS-95), close to Billy Zeitler's August downing and rescue. They also planned to take Moung Ngan (the site later became listed as LS-236), thirteen miles southwest of three mentioned sites, and thirteen miles east of LS-95. The open area containing many villages was planned to be surrounded and rolled up from three sides.



Graphic displaying distances separating Phou Khout, Mung Phanh, and Mung Soui (upper center).

CIA Current Intelligence Bulletin Map, 10/07/64.

Vang Pao's Meo ADC units would hit Boua Khong from the east and Phank He from the north. ADC (read Meo) forces from the San Tiau area (LS-02) and units from Ban Xiangkhong, five-miles north-northwest of Ban Tha Vieng would hold high ground positions straddling Route-4. From the west side of the road, they would begin operations at Ban Pha, and then move northeast six-miles, and east of the road near Ban Peung (LS-21). The ambitious plan envisioned RLA forces seizing Moung Phang, Moung Nam, and securing the entire area south and east of Xieng Khouang Ville. This would include areas east and west of Route-4 above Tha Vieng and below the Ville.

Preliminary air strikes against the targets north and east of Ban Peung began on 28 October while ground troops readied for the Moung Ngam offensive, which was estimated to be complete by early November. With intentions to increase bombing sorties to fifteen or more per day, T-28s were sent to Paksane on 3 November, where ground crews, shuttling daily from Wattay Airport in Air America planes, serviced the aircraft.

Additional requests were forwarded by AIRA for strikes on San Luong on Route-7 to support Meo guerrilla units in their quest to reoccupy formerly held base areas around Phou Nong (LS-71) and Tha Lin Noi (LS-18), and to better conduct Route-7 harassment. More T-28 aircraft were requested for Bouak Hong, northwest of Moung Ngan, Ban Om--the dreaded Phou Kabo mountain, where I was hit in June 1963--Ban Than in the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley, and three enemy positions along Route-4. Planners estimated the air strikes required one week for completion. Pending successful results, troops would advance eastward from the Tham Mok Valley. FAR troops were expected to move as scheduled on the 30th.

In a 1 November message to State, Ambassador Unger commented on Military Region Two and southern operations. Salem

Say (Operation Anniversary) was tailored as a spoiling attack ten to fifteen miles north of Tha Thom to improve the FAR defensive posture in areas where enemy buildups had been noted for a number of weeks.

He stated that some FAR leaders were far too ambitious, bombastic, and often in error in their assessments of situations and objectives. Cautious as always, he was watchful for actions that would tip the military scales too far and produce unwanted enemy reaction. Thus far, he was pleased that both operations were following specified State Department guidelines. He and his Country Team would continue to be alert for signs that the FAR military was exceeding its capability and guidelines. If noted, any actions would be challenged and blocked.

Two days later, Unger met with the Prime Minister to discuss several agendas. As to enemy current intentions, he was concerned by recent enemy attacks, and mentioned the Viet Minh regiment menacing the area north of Tha Thom, and the seven battalions threatening Moug Soui.

On the subject of dissolving Air America, with prompting from Unger, Souvanna concluded that the civilian operation should continue without change, and the turnover of assets to Seaboard World Services be quietly abandoned. No longer considered a political issue, Seaboard should terminate the contract signed with Royal Air Lao in March. Both agreed that unwanted publicity should be avoided.

Regarding three party discussions pertaining to the country's future and government, he recommended that any new meetings be held in Laos.

Regarding Pathet Lao representation in the government, Phouma speculated that spring elections might produce a solution. The elections would be publicized and Pathet Lao politicians invited to participate. Should they accept, the

assembly and government would provide for the possibility of reunification of the constitution and mark the end of the provincial provisional period. If the Pathet Lao declined to join the Government, they would be declared rebels and the elections would proceed.

At Paksane, General Kham Khong failed to provide FACs or FAG for the T-28 missions. Therefore, Unger requested Air Commandos from Udorn take up the slack as they (like Joe Potter) had done during Triangle. Two Waterpump personnel went to join GM-13 at Tha Thom and remained there five days. Acting as ALO and FAG, they directed almost one hundred strikes on enemy encroaching the area.

By 9 November, in a three-battalion, two-pronged offensive five-miles north-northeast of Route-42, the enemy began movements toward Tha Thom. Attempting to counter FAR operations, in a series of night and early morning attacks, they reportedly attacked a FAR position and collapsed the flank of GM-13 five miles north of LS-11. However, T-28 pilots continued pounding the enemy, and they failed to penetrate friendly lines five kilometers to the north of the Tha Thom Valley.

Vang Pao's guerrillas failed to achieve their objectives, but enemy counterattacks were thwarted. The little general later admitted that the T-28 strikes prevented the fall of Tha Thom. There was some concern at the time by Western observers that government forces relied too much on air and not enough on aggressive ground operations.

During this period, an original Meo site at San Tiau (LS-02) was recaptured and other minor gains made, but overall, relatively little was accomplished so late in the rainy season.

A list of November USAID rice-wheat requirements revealed the vast amount of territory either already held by the RLG or recovered by FAR and Meo forces and supplied by Air America and Bird aircraft. Cleared by FIC as to security and assigned recognition signals, the drop zones were alphabetically arranged into zones, and classified as to priority, and sizeable refugee centers. They generally followed a circular clockwise pattern (at least that is how the supply system began). Many historical sites, located deep in or on the periphery of enemy areas, remained in the government inventory for years. Over the previous one and a half years, I delivered people and supplies to the majority of these sites in lower Military Region Two. As we expanded further into Sam Neua Province, I increasingly became familiar with the additional sites.

XIENG KHOUANG PROVINCE

In Zone Alpha, located at the center of a theoretical circle, Long Tieng, ¹ the focal point of all military activity, received an enormous monthly total of 8,100 sacks of rice. These were either stored in warehouses or distributed to outlying sites. Pha Khao (LS-14) and Sam Tong (LS-20) received considerably less rice.

From Site-20A's strategic location, it was easy to comprehend Vang Pao's clever, well-conceived strategy to contain his area and expand in most directions. Since the early days at

¹ Not plotted on maps, and still referred to as LS-98, Long Tieng (The Alternate, LS-20A) was carried on the ATOG list as Nhot Hong, likely for security reasons.

Padong and Pha Khao it was clearly evident that he positioned sites to cover his flanks and protect the main base, or receive early warning signals in the event of enemy incursion. As additional threats later increased to the southwest, he developed more sites to plug gaps in his defenses. In addition, new sites provided opportunity for recruiting new troops.

East of Long Tieng, but still considered within Zone Alpha, were the sites of Padong (LS-05), Pha Phai (LS-65), and Tha Vieng (LS-13). Also included was Phou San Noi, ten miles south of Long Tieng. Out of sequence, Ban Pheung (LS-95) and Phou Louang (drops by request only) lay on the east and west sides of Phou Sao in Zone Golf.

Except for Ban Na (LS-15) on the southern fringe of the Plain of Jars, Houei Ki Nin (LS-38), San Louang (LS-41), Xieng Dat (LS-117), Ban Nam Thong-ten west and south of Route-7 in Zone Bravo tied in the north and western flanks.

Continuing in a clockwise movement north of Moung Soui in Zone Cocoa ² were Houei Tad, Phou Nong Phi (LS-16-Agony), Phou So (LS-57), Phou Tin, Pha Kut.

Zone Delta was located north of the PDJ. This included Phou Vieng (LS-06), Bouam Long (LS-32, originally Site-88), Phou Bia (a mountain between 06 and 32), Phou Cum (LS-50, across the river valley from 06), San Pha Ka (LS-33, north of Site-50), and Houei Chon (north of 33).

Northeast and east of Bouam Long Zone Echo sites, except for Site-52, were generally scattered east of LOCs plunging south of Sam Neua, but were in close enough proximity to allow roadwatch and action teams a safe haven to impact them as necessary. The largely populated area of Houei Sa An (LS-23,

² Cocoa: Probably an archaic term left over from World War Two, the originator of the list was not familiar with the current military phonetic alphabet. Coco should have been listed as Charlie.

over 1,000 sacks) was close to lower Route-6. Nhot Lien (three-miles east of Site-29, Ban Tha area (LS-52), and Ban Song (LS-29, three miles west of Nhot Lien) were adjacent to largely undeveloped Route-61. Further east lay Ban Vieng (LS-89), Keo Bone (later designated south LS-201), and Sam Pho (North LS-201). They were located northeast of the Ban Ban Valley, and provided intelligence gathering teams access to the portion of Route-7 leading through Nong Het to the North Vietnamese border.

Southwest of Long Tieng, across the Nam Ngum in Zone Hotel, lay Pa Khe (LS-51), Nam Deng (LS-110), Ban Tin Bong (LS-90), Tham Sorn Yai (LS-74), San Ma Kaow, Ban Nam Noi, and the newer site at Long Pot (LS-132).

South of Route-13, fifteen miles east of the Sala Phou Khoun road junction in Zone India, the old Meo site of Phou Chia (LS-25) was located.

Again to the east, Tha Thom (LS-11) and Moung Cha (LS-113) were located in Zone Romeo. Home to the majority of refugees, "VP's Farm" received 2,430 sacks of rice.

Except for Nam Keng in Zone Foxtrot (twenty one miles east of LS-95), sites in Zone Juliet ranged twenty to fifty miles east of Tha Thom to the North Vietnamese border and into MR-3's Khammouane Province. Moung Ngat (LS-01), Moung Moc LS-46 (twenty miles east of Tha Thom); Moung Tiouen (LS-91, forty east of Tha Thom), Chieng Sa Ni (LS-45, thirty three east of Tha Thom), Ban Pha Dou, (later LS-263, forty eight miles east of Tha Thom), Ban San Soak (LS-126, fifty miles south southeast of Tha Thom) were located in MR-3. Although rare, I occasionally serviced these remote sites with help from very competent guides.

HOUA PHAN (SAM NEUA) PROVINCE

Four additional zones were Zone Mike north of the Neutralist-controlled Moung Heim valley, Pha Bong (LS-76), Houei

Tong Kho (later LS-184), and Phou Cha (east of Moung Son, L-59).

Continuing clockwise, Zone November north of Na Khang, was available, but not in general use until 1965. Next were the important mixed FAR headquarters at Houa Moung (LS-58), the impressive mountain base at Phu Pha Thi (LS-85), north of that and the closest site to the North Vietnamese border, Houei Kha Moun (LS-111), and Cha Thao (Houei Ma-LS-107).

In Zone Papa four miles east of Site-85 sat the large tribal area of Phou Den Din (a quota of 1,008 sacks, on request only).

Zone Oscar, in close proximity to Sam Neua town, contained the old garrison of Hong Non (LS-86), Pha Kha (five miles north of 86), and Moung Sang (three miles south of 86). The days of many of these sites were numbered. ³

MR-2

Late on the fifth, I accompanied Wayne Knight to Long Tieng in Hotel-21. Carrying supplies and troops moving east to support the operation there, we flew past sunset. As the CPH and Stan Wilson were along to swap Hotel-21 for Hotel-12, which needed preliminary repairs, Wayne spent the night at the Blue House.

The next morning I worked east again in Hotel-20. Shortly after touching down for fuel, the Vientiane Oscar Mike captured me for Delta SAR standby. Once again, I was not the first side number called. Resigned to the duty, I had the ship topped off and scrounged whatever weapon was available for the Flight Mechanic. It was still officially illegal for crews to carry weapons, but most pilots believed counter-fire might slow enemy fire and make the difference between success or failure during a

³ ATOG Rice/Wheat Requirements for November 1964, Air America Archives University of Texas at Richardson, Texas.

particularly intense mission. Personally, I would rather place my job on the line than die or return without a downed pilot because of a lack of a weapon. When available, weapons varied. M-1, M2 rifles, Browning BAR's, and an occasional .30 caliber machine gun rounded out the arsenal. I was not always convinced that my Flight Mechanic was familiar with a weapon, but took solace in having a tool onboard with which to fight.

For some time, end-of-life flak vests and short pants were available as a checkout item from the supply department. They had been released for our benefit from the military supply system by someone in authority, pressured to aid the SAR cause. Although they were dirty and stained, some of us employed them to provide protection against flying shrapnel. Many crewmembers sat on them to protect the family jewels. Billy Zeitler probably still had a kidney today primarily because he was wearing a vest at the time of his August downing. Hot in the summer months, they were often consigned to the cargo compartment, but in the cool season, they did provide warmth.

Other than the large metal engine mounted in front of the helicopter, protection from flying missiles in the cockpit was nil, and neither management nor maintenance appeared concerned enough to propose a solution. It was like that. We were cannon fodder, and higher-ups were in denial. Therefore, before the vests became available, when we began flying upcountry again after the long layoff, some enterprising pilots took the initiative and recommended filling the deep, hollow seat pans with a thick Sears & Roebuck catalogue to stop or deflect shrapnel or small arms rounds. No matter how utilitarian they were in providing the necessary means in outhouses, I am sure Misters Sears or Roebuck never envisioned such a use for their catalogues. Anyway, they were difficult to obtain, hence not readily used. After much consideration, Howard Estes, who had

already experienced minor battle damage to his person, went one-step further. He had a quarter inch steel plate with a welded handle manufactured locally to fit the exact dimensions of the seat pan. The device was quite heavy and I do not believe he used it more than twice, particularly after we began deadheading on other aircraft, which limited our ability to carry more than normal gear. Therefore, the practice was abandoned and we left the potential of incurring flying missiles to our privates to chance.

Lazaro and I spent a couple of hours at Ban Na while we waited for the word to launch or were released. The friendly radio operator provided us with his usual good humor, drinks, and prurient girly magazines. Long a resident at LS-15, the man's days were numbered at the site. A silver-tongue devil, he managed to get into the "knickers" of a number of local girls. Word finally circulated throughout the community as to just how many he had seduced by indicating that he would marry them. In truth, he did not intend to marry any. Suspecting the worst from irate fathers, Vang Pao arrived at Ban Na and spirited him away just before the arrival of a group of village elders intent on killing the man. Afterward, since Long Tieng Americans had originally assigned the radio operator there because of his English proficiency, Vang Pao received a lot of verbal abuse from the elders. ⁴

ADDITIONAL ERZATZ BOMBING

That afternoon, on the Long Tieng ramp I observed Terry Burke toting a BAR and a bandolier of twenty round magazines into Lloyd Zimmerman's Porter. Meo troops were attacking Pathet

⁴ Blaine Jensen Letter, 04/29/96.

Lao troops in the Khang Ko area. T-28 pilots were busy further east, so Burke elected to provide his own brand of air support for the offensive. Firing from the open trapdoor, Terry poured plunging fire onto enemy positions that enabled the Meo to retake the area. It marked one of the last unconventional sorties of that kind. Having heard unsubstantiated rumors about the rock bombing for a number of weeks, and fearing unwanted publicity, the U.S. Ambassador finally acted, forbidding all civilian non-sanctioned unorthodox air offensives.

Realistically, to preserve the intrepid warriors' mortality, it was well past time their foolishness ceased. Some weeks before, emboldened by success, but no longer satisfied with only rock assaults, Zim had graduated to yet another form to bombing convoys. He had a grenade holder fabricated at a metal shop in Udorn with identical dimensions as the Porter's recessed drop hole. About thirty twelve-inch tubes, large enough to accommodate U.S. style grenades, were welded together inside a lipped frame. The device held dozens of grenades that could be "safely" stacked three deep in their respective tubes after the pins were removed. Restrained by the drop door, the mini-bombs were calculated to spread out in a satisfactory pattern when released.

The first time the new bombing rack was tested, cases of fragmentation grenades were loaded and Terry hopped in the cabin to act as a bomber extraordinaire. During the short distance to Route-4 Terry carefully loaded the tubes. Then excitement peaked in the plane. While encountering turbulence, the Porter pitched violently upward. To prevent the explosives from ejecting into the cabin during a negative "G" maneuver, Burke immediately threw his body across the rack.

Almost from the start, Terry discovered that dropping grenades could pose a real danger to the aircraft and occupants.

Over time, to effect maximum surprise and decrease risk from return fire, Zim developed varying approaches to convoys during his attacks. Apparently, on this particular day, the gun-shy troops observed the Porter flying toward them and, leaving the trucks, they charged downhill. At the last moment, Lloyd modified his approach and positioned the machine directly over the panicked men. After opening the trapdoor, dozens of grenades dropped from the tubes and hurtled downward. Once free of constraints, the spring activated spoons popped outward with a metallic clang and triggered the internal fuses. Despite the Porter's low altitude, a few grenades exploded prematurely close to the aircraft belly. Considerably shaken, considering themselves lucky to still be airborne, they did not assess the BDA, but immediately departed for Twenty Alternate.

Safely secured on the Long Tieng loading ramp, an inspection revealed that flying shrapnel had badly damaged the plane's underbelly near the tail. Observing the punctures and hearing about the incident, Air America pilots enjoyed great mirth, while Lloyd and Terry attempted to devise a plausible story to spin to the Bird and Son maintenance department. One pilot feared that Zim's time on earth was nearly complete.

Anxious to sustain pressure on convoys and prevent a similar incident, the bombers elected to innovate and smooth their technique, finally employing the time-honored method of paper masking tape calculated to secure the handles until striking the earth. Experimentation over time revealed the exact amount of tape necessary for the job. ⁵

⁵ During Special Forces White Star days, activated grenades were placed inside glass Skippy peanut jars and thrown out of the helicopter. The rationale was that upon striking the ground the jars would break, allowing the spoon to activate, trigger the striker, and allow the grenade to explode.

Despite the fact that their "bombing" techniques were unsophisticated, they exacted a formidable toll on enemy materiel, men, and morale. One day they discovered that the enemy was taking notice of their activity. A convoy was spotted traveling along a mountain road. Taking advantage of the steep hillside with a ravine below, Lloyd flew a flanking pattern parallel to, and at the same elevation as the trucks. Burke opened a side window and positioned a .30 caliber machine gun, preparing to commence grazing fire on the moving objects. While only fifty yards away, he observed a canvas flap on one truck being pulled back, exposing a .50 caliber barrel. He realized he was no match for the formidable weapon. As the enemy gunner hammered away at the Porter, Terry simultaneously returned fire and yelled for Zim to dive-dive-dive. Lloyd dove for the bottom of the ravine below the gunner's line of fire and within seconds the battle was over. Greatly cowed, the civilian combatants silently returned to base. After that close encounter, Ambassador Unger's edict to cease and desist just might have saved their bacon. ⁶

Ambassador Unger's decree did not deter Burke from conducting further clandestine operations. Aware of enemy road-bound supply line vulnerability, and that Meo forces were filtering back into areas south of Route-7, Terry persuaded Vang Pao to let him form and train an elite Meo sniper unit. Aiding him in the task, Terry chose PARU Twatchi, a skilled trainer, demolitions expert, and marksman. To eliminate families tagging along and hindering missions, only single men were selected. New 03 Springfield rifles with scopes, and camouflaged fatigues were

⁶ Terry Burke Email, 03/10/03.
Terry Burke *Early Days*, 09/10/06.
Mike Marshall Email, 08/25/99.

scrounged for the program. Training was conducted vigorously along the east side of the valley. The recruits, in addition to shooting accurately, were taught the Marine way of "Snooping and Pooping," suitable locations, patience, and the art of camouflage. They also learned various North Vietnamese Army officer insignia for important kills. Terry obtained armor-piercing rounds that would easily slice through engine blocks and armor-piercing incendiary bullets that would torch vehicle gas tanks.

Some individuals dropped out for various reasons, but the unit finished training with twelve skilled snipers. To test their mettle, Terry and Twatchi accompanied four men at a time into the field along Route-7 near the east side of the Plain of Jars. Selecting a prime location, they waited to conduct business. Two snipers were assigned to disable the first and successive trucks with incendiary rounds. The rest were tasked to shoot the crews as they abandoned the vehicles. Burke and the PARU joined in the crew shoot. Locations were changed for each group. By the time the graduation exercise terminated, the groups had crippled ten vehicles and killed more than twenty enemy soldiers without incurring a single casualty.

The success was only temporary. Vang Pao proved unwilling to use the unit to good advantage. Instead of being based at Long Tieng and assigned specific missions as Burke had planned, the men disappeared, ostensibly to their home ADC units. Vang Pao declined to discuss the issue. Terry was stumped, until one night while sharing beers with Twatchi, he learned an important side to Vang Pao's character: that of ego, politics, and pride. The PARU explained something to him only an indigenous Asian would understand. The general could never tolerate having a plan succeed that did not originate with him. If what was construed as an American initiative succeeded, he would lose face with his

people. It was a difficult lesson for a proud young man to swallow, but one Terry never forgot. ⁷

After release from Ban Na standby, we continued working missions to the east. That night, while feeling especially good and talking about military matters, I leaped to my feet and, facing Tony, announced to the motley crew in the hooch that when in Udorn I was a civilian, but at Long Tieng, a soldier. Perhaps I came on a little strong and appeared stupid, because Tony simply looked at me long and hard like I was wacky. I sat down embarrassed and silent, and was happy when it was time to ascend the hill.

The following day, after more irresponsible behavior from peers reluctant to take their turn in the standby barrel, unbelievably, I was captured for a second straight SAR duty. The only exception was this down time covered the entire morning and constituted the longest standby for me yet. The long, lonely, nervous hours passed slowly. When finally released during the early afternoon, there was little time remaining to work before Udorn recalled me. It is difficult to describe how disgusted and angry I was during the flight south.

The next day, after purchasing soap, toilet paper, salt, and a bottle of Tabasco sauce from the Country Store, I flew back to Long Tieng with Stan Wilson in Hotel-12. Using tangy hot sauce to spice bland "C" rations to create a more acceptable taste was a time-honored Marine Corps method expounded on by Steve Stevens. Poe had acquired a taste and fondness for hot seasoning and claimed it killed parasites. One time, Zim or

⁷ Terry Burke Emails, 02/23/04, 03/01/04.
Terry Burke, *Early Days*.

someone sent him a large mason jar of extremely fiery hot pepper sauce and Poe was in hog heaven. ⁸

THE CHALLENGE

My trip was specifically tailored to recover a crashed UH-34D. I had not flown very much with Stan Wilson, who preferred to crew with his selected pilots. He was a senior Flight Mechanic, and popular enough for Operations to accommodate his wishes. Stanley was an unusual Flight Mechanic in that he was very positive, almost authoritative, in dealing with pilots. Like other American Flight Mechanics, he had amassed a number of "bootleg hours" flying with Captains who let him handle the H-34 controls. Not seeing a special need for this, I rarely let anyone but rated pilots fly my aircraft. This probably made me unpopular with American Flight Mechanics, but I believed their primary job was in the cabin section, where they were able to monitor items I could not. An exception to this was Vang Pao, who grunted and demanded to fly when he wanted. Still, because of Stan's talent, experience level, and intelligence, I was delighted that he was my chief.

I knew the recovery task would probably cost me flight time, and just after losing substantial time because of ground-bound SAR duty, I believed I was being stiffed again. Perhaps no one else was available or wanted the job. Onboard was a talented maintenance team equipped to strip and participate in the recovery of Hotel Foxtrot that PIC Charlie Weitz indicated had lost an engine in the Khang Kho area on 2 August. According to someone in the know, Weitz had crashed eleven helicopters in Asia, a couple while in the USMC, and had never encountered more

⁸ Thanks to both Zim and Tony, I later discovered that hot food eradicated my long-lasting, difficult case of amoebas. Moreover, I still ingest peppers to attempt keeping prostate cancer cells at bay.

than a few minor scratches. Although he likely flew with an occasional hangover the first day of a RON, unlike others, Charlie never touched alcoholic beverages while upcountry.⁹ It was his personal rule and he reserved boozing solely for off time in Udorn, Bangkok, and Hong Kong.

Since the Customer considered the area unsafe to risk a recovery team's efforts in extracting the machine, directly after the crash Mike Marshall had accompanied a management type to conduct a hasty investigation. It was not an easy place for aviators to work. Other pilots, Abadie in particular, augured in there because of the high altitude (density altitude) and adverse winds. After examination, Mike believed that pilot error, likely lost turns, had caused the accident. Before leaving the area, he obtained a trophy, a bent tail rotor blade severed from its hub. Later, along with Stan Wilson and Wayne Knight, he signed the final report indicating that engine failure was the accident's cause.¹⁰

Since Meo troops had recently entered the region in sufficient numbers to secure the area, the location was deemed safe enough to spend a reasonable amount of time on the ground. Landing on a slope next to the damaged machine and discharging the maintenance team and their tools, I could see that a large amount of work was required prior to attempting a sling load. Some of the radios and internal cabin items had been recovered right after the accident. It was immediately clear, as the ship sat precariously upright on a very steep slope, that anchoring cables were required to prevent it from rolling downhill. The mechanics enthusiastically went about their work accomplishing this, and began stripping the least difficult parts to lighten

⁹ Actually Charlie denied having hangovers.

¹⁰ Mike Marshall Email. Except for years later to the Author, he never divulged his actual opinion on the subject.

the machine. As the damaged tail rotor assembly intermediate gearboxes, shafts, tail pylon, struts, cargo and engine clamshell doors, cockpit cover, and cowlings were removed, I ferried the salvageable parts back to Sam Tong. Then I returned to the location with additional personnel, boxes of tools, straps, and other required items a Caribou crew had prepositioned at Sam Tong.

To my knowledge, since an operation like this had not been attempted before at such a high altitude and sloping terrain, trial and error and common sense would largely rule our actions. After assessing the challenge and enormous task involved in the recovery, my attitude changed to a positive one. I then considered it an honor to be selected for the job.

Assuming that all fuel had either evaporated or been drained, an empty UH-34D generally weighed about 7,900-pounds. A lift using the 5,000-pound-rated cargo hook was rarely, if ever attempted at sea level. From my previous experience in moving heavy howitzers into and out of Phu Khe, I knew that much of the operation depended on favorable winds and density altitude. Any attempt to lift an item much over 2,000 pounds would be extremely difficult or impossible at the ship's present altitude. Besides feeling uncomfortable in the field with no evident security, it was hot, and the work very difficult.

Around noon, the maintenance team wanted me to attempt a lift, with several heavy components still attached. Considering a lift premature at this stage, but commiserating with the team members, I agreed to attempt a lift. Low on fuel, the first westerly attempt was conducted with a long line attached by steel cables to the main rotor head. Because of the aircraft position on the slope, regardless of the wind direction, the only viable takeoff direction was to the southwest. Furthermore, I would have to lift the load to a reasonable height above

ground, achieve translational lift, and clear the side of the hill. While hovering well out of ground effect (OGE), using 2800 RPM and maximum power, I was unable to budge the load. I then recommended shortening the strap, but this achieved the same result. The failed attempts indicated that major components would require removal to drastically lighten the ship. The envisioned work was very unpopular with the mostly Filipino team, who were anxious to return home to their families that evening. However, after consultation and cajoling, Stanley, perhaps our most experienced and competent helicopter Flight Mechanic in Udorn, convinced the team of the need to substantially lighten the machine. Not at all pleased, but resigned to spending a night upcountry, they labored throughout the afternoon, removing heavy components. I easily lifted the main rotor blade head and transmission, complete with struts and hoses intact, to Sam Tong.

Removal of a 2,200-pound engine and accessories, impeller, clutch assembly, shafts, main landing gear and struts, and fuselage cone in the field was a challenge any time. At a minimum, an engine removal required the use of a metal "A" frame and chain pulleys in the field. However, on this slope, it was considerably more complicated, and subsequently took longer to accomplish. By the end of the day, although largely removed, I still had not slung or carried all the bulky and heavier parts to base.

Another attempt to lift the now stripped hull failed. However, I did manage to raise the load to a four-inch hover.

It was late and I had a low fuel state. Besides, since everyone appeared very fatigued from the long, exhausting day and required transportation to Site-20, we elected to forego another hull lift attempt. That would be performed in the early



After the Author failed in several attempts to lift most of a UH-34D from the steep slopes of the Khang Kho, Laos area because of power and weight limitations, Flight Mechanic Stan Wilson, hanging out the cabin door, provided guidance in centering the helicopter to remove the transmission rotorhead assembly. Photo taken by a recovery team member.

Stan Wilson Collection.



Removal of the transmission without the rotor head to Sam Tong. Straps and cables are strung and secured upslope to prevent the helicopter from rolling downhill from effects of the helicopter downwash.

Wilson Collection.

morning hours when light winds and cooler temperatures prevailed. These conditions might enable my engine to develop additional power and enhance lift, improving chances of a successful lift. Before leaving, the transmission deck was re-rigged with three bolted cables deemed short enough to safely clear the underside of Hotel-12.

After dropping the team at Sam Tong, we returned to The Alternate. Thinking the projected lift might require extended hovering, I planned my last fuel burn accordingly, and we only pumped one drum into the forward tank.

Early the following morning, after delivering a skeleton crew to the site, we prepared for the lift. Stan centered me over the cables' ring. Fighting the vicious downwash, an "experienced" man managed to insert the device into the hook mechanism.

When Wilson advised me the mechanic was safely away from the aircraft, I applied maximum allowable RPM and power. The shortened cable enabled the machine to clear the deck a few inches, but still did not afford a sufficient height above ground to ensure clearing the hillside. Just when I despaired of lifting the bulky load, while using pilot technique to inch forward, a gentle breeze caressed the ship in my planned takeoff direction. This provided the additional lift necessary to attempt a takeoff. The calculated risk succeeded and, with extra pilot technique, we were soon thrust into airspace with no immediate obstacles to impede our progress toward Sam Tong.

Even though finally airborne with the load, new factors surfaced to complicate the operation. I had to use high power that would consume large amounts of precious fuel. While ascending at an agonizingly slow rate, I was obligated to proceed at a low speed to minimize a pendulum action that would produce an oscillating load. Despite attempts to minimize this



With the Author at the controls and Stan Wilson monitoring the load from the cargo compartment, a successful cockpit and fuselage section lift is performed from the Khang Kho, Laos, area.

Wilson Collection.

condition, I could feel the fuselage swinging and realized there was little, if anything, I could do to control it. Unfortunately, believing the heavy hull would ride properly, we had failed to envision such a problem, and the possibility of rigging a drogue chute to stabilize, control, and streamline the load had never occurred to us.

While nearing Padong Ridge, Stanley hung out the door to advise me of the load's progress. Then winds and turbulence increased, causing the load to swing longitudinally, even more dangerously close to the belly. Having done all I could to prevent the load from swinging, I was completely out of options. It was obvious that we were barely going to clear the ridge and it was impossible to fly any slower and maintain altitude. My pair of eyes in the cabin section confirmed what I was thinking. We were in serious trouble. It was necessary to rid ourselves of the imminent danger immediately, a hazard that at the minimum might damage the underside of Hotel-12, or at a maximum cause tail pylon or tail rotor failure.

Despite the large expenditure of manpower involved in stripping and moving the hull, safety of my ship and crew took precedence, and I elected to drop the load. After informing Wilson of my intentions and receiving the impression he did not care at that point, I armed the automatic hook release system and depressed the cyclic pickle switch. Nothing happened.

Further attempts to jettison the hull failed. Instead of plunging to the ground as expected, the load still swung wildly underneath our belly. No problem, Sikorsky engineers had devised a redundant and supposedly fail-safe back-up hook release.¹¹ Next, I vigorously stomped the manual release plunger on the floor with the heel of my left foot. Nothing. Frustrated and

¹¹ Depending on weight, cost and other factors aircraft redundancy was common in helicopters and fixed wing planes.



Author ascending slowly to the west toward Padong Ridge after departing Khang Kho, Laos, with a UH-34D fuselage sling load.
Stan Wilson Collection.



While accelerating toward Padong Ridge, the sling load did not ride well, and an oscillating motion fostered consternation among the crew as to the viability of a successful outcome.

Wilson Collection.

highly concerned, I plunged the device again, again without positive result. This was a new development. I had never heard of a manual release failing to jettison a load. So much for a redundant system...Murphy, you ungracious bastard.

Next I considered the potential for disaster. The load still swung, but somewhat less dangerously close to the belly. This proved the least of my worries. *What were the odds of survival in case we experienced actual engine failure or fuel exhaustion? The external load would certainly change the H-34s autorotational aerodynamics, and even if I could manhandle the machine to the ground, there was a distinct possibility that I would land on the hull, roll over, and burn. Moreover, if we did reach Sam Tong, would the power be sufficient to terminate at a high hover over the load or would I be committed to landing on top of the load?* This was an intangible I had not considered, and it appeared the short cable concept I had recommended to achieve the proper lift might, in the end, bite me in the fanny. On the positive side, Site-20 was about 1,000-feet lower than the Khang Kho site, and the engine had consumed considerable fuel. In fact, the fuel caution light was beginning to blink from low fuel sloshing in the forward tank.

The Man was watching over us that afternoon. In the end, my fears were unfounded. I conducted a slow, normal approach to a spot in the loading area, where I arrived at a steady hover. Retaining his black ICS cord to communicate with me, Stan climbed down under the helicopter and ascertained that the supposedly experienced hook-up man had incorrectly misaligned the ring, fouling and disabling both automatic and manual releases in a supposedly fail safe system. While directing me to hover lower, the extraordinary Flight Mechanic unbolted the sling swedges from the cable eyebolts. I was duly impressed with Stan's outstanding work that day. The nightmare was over. After

reflection, it seemed that a combination of luck, skill, and excellent crew coordination avoided what could have resulted in an extremely bad day.

After taking on fuel we returned to the crash site to retrieve a few miscellaneous parts, and the ground team. By early afternoon, a C-123 crew arrived at Three Golds to ferry the hull and other minor components to Udorn. Pop's assistant, Blaine Jensen, hired several local people to manhandle the H-34 up the airplane's lowered ramp and into the cargo compartment. PIC Fred Walker told Blaine, who witnessed our sling load termination that his ship barely had enough fuel onboard to fly the heavy load to Udorn. This was all preplanned in order to be light enough to roll downhill off the short strip. Fred also indicated that if the weather was below minimums at Udorn, or if he lost an engine inflight, he and the crew would sink into "deep kimshi."

Stan departed south in the C-123 to shepherd the load and coordinate the delicate unloading at the Udorn ramp. He also was going to the base to obtain a hook, cables, and swedges to replace the unit on Hotel-12. Maintenance also wanted to tear down the hook to investigate further damage or material failure. Left without a Flight Mechanic, which effectively grounded me, I was told by operations personnel to fly Hotel-20 the following day. Actually, I was fatigued from the stress of the operation. Contented to take a break, I repositioned to Long Tieng and secured for the day. Eyewitness Wilson later related that the C-123 was indeed overloaded and Skyline Ridge ominously filled the windscreen long before sufficient altitude was attained for a safe crossing. ¹²

¹² Blaine Jensen Letter, 07/01/96.
Stan Wilson E-mail.

ENGINE PROBLEMS

Recently, a few pilots had experienced R-1820 engine problems, which the maintenance department believed was related to carburetor malfunctions. Whatever the cause, it marked a relatively new occurrence, one in which the engine sputtered, coughed, and quit at altitude. With reduction of collective pitch and a resulting loss of altitude, the engines mysteriously functioned again. At the time, no one could explain exactly why this happened. Occasionally an engine sputtered or ran rough on the ground. Using a temporary field expediency, a good mechanic could illegally tweak the mixture control knob to a richer position, enabling the pilot to continue working.

As FAR continued to regain additional territory in Military Region Two, we worked further east toward Tha Thom, and well beyond. To accommodate the Customer and troops, we attempted to cram as much flight time into the shortened daylight hours as possible. While returning to Long Tieng prior to twilight, I had just cleared Padong Ridge when I heard Howard Estes's distress call. In a high pitched, stressed voice, he radioed that while passing Lima Site-65 at 8,000-feet, his engine had coughed and begun running rough. It was almost too late to conduct a safe daylight visual forced landing in the shadowed valleys and deep ravines. In addition, the reaction time for anyone to pick him up was minimal. Then, while descending, the engine began running smoothly again, so he elected to continue toward Twenty Alternate. The relief of everyone still airborne, and within hearing range, could be measured in resounding silence.

Then abeam the Padong site, Howard's engine began sputtering again. This time, he began an autorotation to one of the flat, lower terraced shelves located below the site, which natives had cultivated over the years. As he landed, I started toward his position with the intention of retrieving the crew

and ferrying them to our base. The hell with the H-34, it could remain there until the next day, or until maintenance could establish the problem. By the time I arrived overhead, Howard was already hover checking the engine. Ascertaining that the motor was running smoothly again, despite my advice to leave the aircraft in place, he launched for Long Tieng. Trailing the helicopter, I anxiously followed his flight progress until he landed safely. Because a forced landing and ensuing rescue would have been difficult at that time of day, I was a little perturbed with him, and we had a few words after he landed. He had incurred a definite problem that manifested itself several times, yet he elected to continue tempting fate, and failed to heed a warning to leave the aircraft at a safe place. His choice seemed idiotic to me. However, that was Howard's modus operandi, one that would plague him throughout his Air America employment.

Estes already enjoyed the unflattering title among his peers—"magnet-ass." This label stemmed from his early experience with the flintlock projectile incident and several other minor hits. Perhaps the nickname was earned because he eagerly talked about battle damage I, like most other pilots, chose not to discuss this subject. Howard had already experienced several engine problems in his short tenure with the Company.¹³ Like Joe Btfspk in Al Capp's *Lil Abner* comic strip, he was fast assuming a jinx reputation as one who had a continuous black cloud over his head. Some in the organization believed that Howard unduly pushed his physical and mental envelope a bit too much. Others were relieved that most of the incidents involved him and not them. I am not entirely sure, but perhaps Estes manifested some

¹³ Howard Estes once told me that he had incurred seventeen engine failures while serving in the Army. This was difficult to accept, for my squadron only had two and these occurred toward the end of our overseas tour.

inner personal drive to excel above all others in pleasing the Customer and management. In all fairness, he always managed to do a good job of handling all emergencies, and always walked safely away from them. Still, the latest incident did little to dispel his growing mantra as the "magnet."

While Stan Wilson and I completed the final stages of the Khang Kho fuselage recovery operation, the Black Cloud syndrome continued to afflict Howard, and he experienced yet another engine failure. Airdropping rice west of Ban Tha Vieng, Hotel-12's engine suddenly quit. He autorotated east toward lower, open ground adjacent to the Nam Giap. However, the dreadful 1:1 glide ratio of the H-34 prevailed and, like a falling rock, he landed short of the riverbank. Despite his Mayday calls on the way to the ground, no one acknowledged his distress call. Considering the area, at the very least a fluid no-man's-land in contesting parties' struggle for territory, Howard and his very nervous Filipino Flight Mechanic departed the ship, so rapidly, that he abandoned his camera and other personal belongings carried in the cockpit.

Observing people emerge from the treeline into the open field, the crew headed east at high port. As Father Brouchard repeatedly cautioned us to avoid, they stayed off established trails against the possibility that they might be mined. In the process of fighting his way through high grass, Howard slightly injured an eyeball.

Charlie Weitz, with Phil Goddard conducting one of his final flights as a First Officer, responding to a fixed wing pilot's relay of Howard's Mayday call, moved toward the area. When word of the problem reached Long Tieng, CPH Wayne Knight, recently arrived at The Alternate to ferry a helicopter to Udorn, boarded Bill Tedder's Bird & Son Porter to help look for Howard. Other aircraft began the search, but had difficulty in

immediately spotting the evading crew in the jungle environment that had apparently swallowed them.

During rest breaks, Howard managed to repair his supply-issued survival radio. After a time, he contacted Tedder and cautioned him that the enemy appeared to be pursuing him, and were in close proximity. It was considered too dangerous to attempt a rescue. However, the crew in the overhead aircraft became a little suspicious about actual enemy activity when they failed to observe combatants, or received any ground fire after making many low passes.

Eventually, the ever-fearless Weitz arrived at a hover over the crew. During the hoist operation, Goddard hung out the left window indiscriminately firing what looked to Wayne like a large caliber weapon. ¹⁴

Charlie landed at an abandoned strip a few miles north and transferred the crew to Tedder's ship for delivery to Udorn. As they boarded, Wayne noted that the disheveled and bleeding crew were covered with black, blood-gorged leeches extending into their armpits and groins. Goddard, with adrenalin coursing through his body, climbed out of the H-34 wearing a greasy flak jacket and holding his puny weapon at the ready. Weitz had a little fun mocking his highly agitated state, and did nothing to lessen the sense of danger.

Howard, who was a good friend of the Vientiane-based Tedder family reported that Wayne had observed that Bill Tedder carried a M-2 carbine in the Porter, and later reported him for possessing an illegal weapon. Because of this infraction, Tedder

¹⁴ The weapon was actually a .25 caliber pistol. Years later Howard claimed to the Author that they had experienced ground fire during the rescue phase. This may or may not have been the case, as he also recalled ground fire during the Commander Lynn rescue in June. As an active participant in that operation, I can attest to neither hearing rifle fire nor seeing any projectiles.

received a severe reprimand and penalty of one-month's leave without pay.¹⁵

NEW FLIGHT MECHANICS

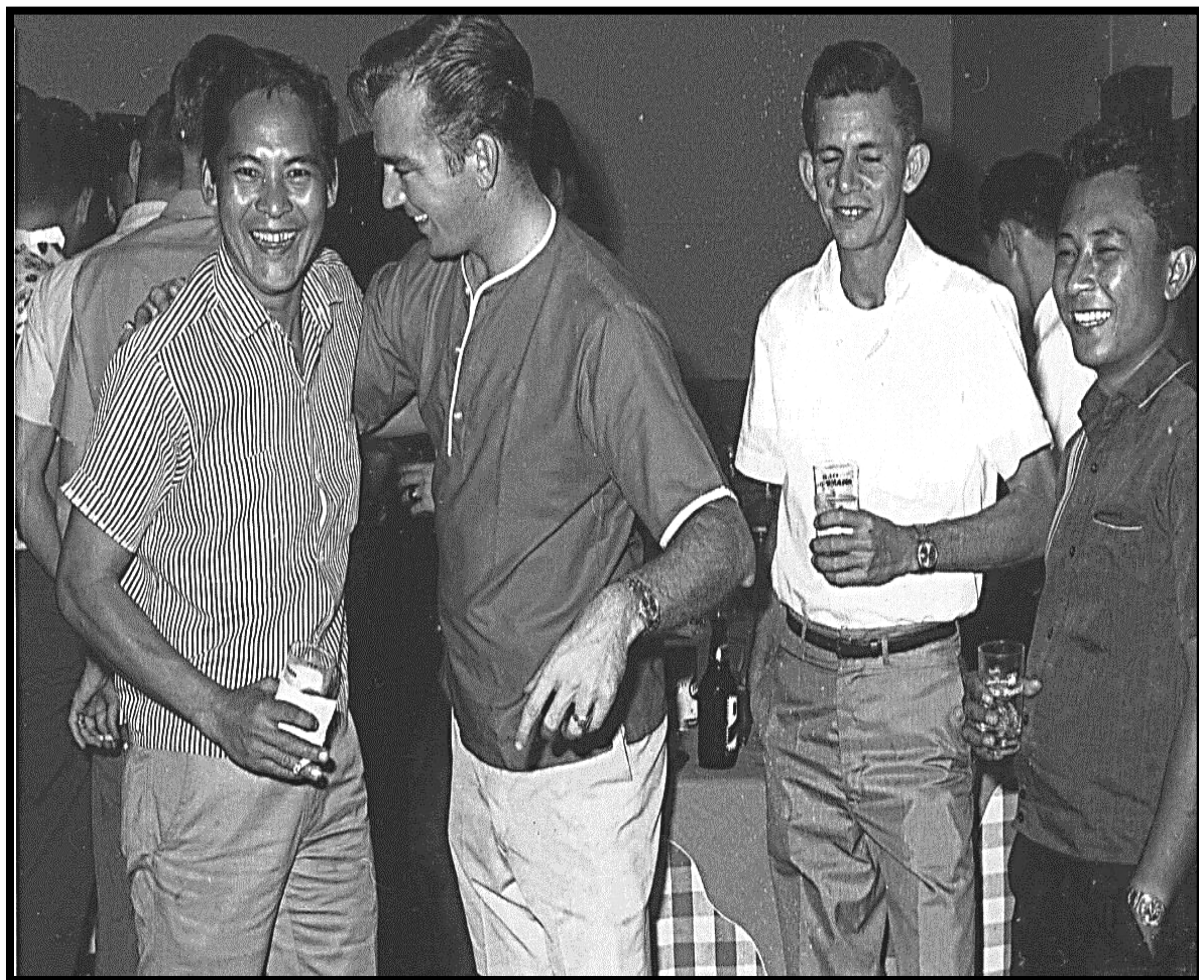
My transfer to Hotel-20 included a new training Flight Mechanic, good-natured Rudy Serafico. Before being released on his own, he only lacked a few more days under the tutelage of Chief Flight Mechanic, Stan Wilson, who returned specifically to perform this duty. Because the additional H-34s we received during previous months had required Flight Mechanics, the Company, still counting nickels and dimes, hired more Filipino mechanics. A couple representing the younger Filipino generation, possessed more vitality, and articulated and understood English far better than the old timers. When issuing orders or requesting information, it was a pleasure not to hear the standard "Wots that Cap?" over the ICS and have to repeat myself several times.

Two young mechanics hired in the past two months were Rudy Serafico and Joe Siaotong. As per maintenance procedure, after demonstrating their ability performing ground maintenance in Udorn, paying their dues on local test flights, and flying upcountry with experienced Flight Mechanics, they were added to the roster and released for duty. Short in stature, they were long on competence as Flight Mechanics. However, they contrasted in that Rudy represented a bubbly extrovert, with Joe being a more taciturn individual. Both men made the work load easier for me.

¹⁵ This observation also has to be taken with a grain of salt, as it was totally out of character for our CPH, and he took no similar action against Phil Goddard, whom he observed overtly carrying a pistol.

EW Howard Estes Letters.

Knight Email, 06/24/00, 06/26/00, 06/28/00, 06/29/00.



At a Club Rendezvous party, Captain Charlie Weitz is flanked by Filipino Air America mechanics. Left: Johnny Sibal; Louie Moser, and Joe Siatong.

Steve Nichols Collection.

Before additional Flight Mechanics were hired, men were first scavenged from the scarce manpower pool in the Maintenance Department's shops for test flights, ferry flights, and short RONs. Some were enlisted into the flying business kicking and screaming, for they had opted for groundwork because of family issues, a hairy incident upcountry, death of a friend, fear of SAR duty, or the escalating war.

A few previously active Flight Mechanics hired in past years had ceased flying and staked a niche for themselves within various sub maintenance departments. American John Scott was one of these.

According to "Scotty," he stopped flying after alarmed that his pilot was going to crash on landing, he had leaped out the cabin door. The episode so unnerved him that he rarely flew again. I had heard other mechs say they had also jumped from moving H-34s, or were prepared to do so in similar situations. Although an alternative in a pinch, the technique did not seem too wise to me. During any major crash, whirling rotor blades and moving parts could shed and fly long distances as hunks of shrapnel. I would think that remaining with the helicopter was far wiser. However, I did not have to sit below the cockpit and endure the eventuality of a crash.

Knight flew with Scott a few times and had issues with his performance. He noted that the man, even though hired as a Flight Mechanic, did not want the job. Therefore, he was usually assigned ground duties. ¹⁶

"Scotty," a rotund, light skinned Negro from south Philadelphia, was a colorful and beloved character to most of us. He loved parties and invited me to many well attended ones

¹⁶ EW Knight Email, 04/07/01.

at his house. Since he was perpetually short of money, and periodically solicited a couple hundred dollars from me, I do not know if he actually liked or merely used me as his personal bank. I had no complaints though, for I truly liked the man, and at payday, he always repaid the loan.

Over the next three days, we supported operations east of Padong Ridge, helping to move supplies and troops to consolidate gains achieved during the current government operation, and assist with offensives against former sites such as at Phu Khe. The weather was good during the region's transition from the monsoon to the windy, dry season. Therefore, each day I flew more than ten hours. Some of the time was spent at Tha Thom shuttling ammunition to a hilltop site a few thousand feet north of the strip. I quickly tired of this activity. To pass the time, after takeoff I climbed a bit and attempted to autorotate to the landing area. Even with a strong headwind and technique, I never succeeded, but the exercise tended to reinforce my realization of the horrible H-34 glide ratio that caused the machine to fall like a rock.

ROCKET HARASSMENT

Dirty tricks were still in vogue at Long Tieng. In conjunction with other unconventional measures calculated to harass enemy forces, Terry Burke learned that the Agency's home Technical Division, looking for ways to assist Vang Pao's war effort, had developed a method of launching rockets and 55mm artillery warheads from mobile and easily-erected platforms for harassing use in remote areas. Having learned from his PARU mentor of Vang Pao's interest in initiating and implementing new ideas, Terry sowed the seeds of a rocket program with the general. He casually mentioned the Agency's success with the ersatz rocket launchers. Every night at dinner, he introduced

conversation regarding the rockets viability and patiently awaited Vang Pao's public order of its implementation.

Following the general's assent to begin the program **he** envisioned, technical personnel arrived to demonstrate and teach the system to the Case Officers and selected local troops for the program. The two systems utilized disposable light fiberglass tubes. One consisted of six tubes attached side by side with a U-shaped support arm. The arm had etched marks to aid the gunner in establishing a proper angle for the rocket's desired distance and trajectory. A second system employed one tube with a support arm. The explosives were the same off-the-shelf rockets used by attack aircraft.

Launcher and rockets could be easily hauled to a site by a helicopter, or hand carried into remote areas adjacent to enemy positions and quickly erected. Chemical "time pencils" were employed to activate a firing mechanism and allow the guerrilla unit time to vacate the area. Should an enemy patrol stumble on its location, an installed motion sensor instantly fired the device. A small amount of plastic explosive was incorporated into the unit to destroy the evidence after the launch.

The system was field tested with success against an enemy position. Fearing another artillery attack, the enemy abandoned the site. Because of the effort required to manufacture and ship the units to the theater, the system was used sparingly until, finally, no more tubes were produced. ¹⁷

Modifications of the original rocket program continued. With Phu Khe once again in friendly hands, Tony asked me to deliver 2.5-inch rockets, a battery, a simple wooden V-shaped launcher plus him and a few assistants to Site-19. Without going

¹⁷ Terry Burke, *Early Days*.

into details about the history of this makeshift system, while sitting in the left cockpit seat, he described harassing Xieng Khouang Ville and outlying areas. I was aware of Zim's rock and grenade bombing, and Terry's machine gun tactics against enemy positions, so I reveled in the opportunity to participate in the Long Tieng dirty tricks campaign.

On Friday, after returning from a short run east, I was again selected for SAR standby duty at Ban Na. As always, I was not the first pilot called. This time, the Operations Manager called Dick Elder's side number. However, already fully loaded and in the process of departing the valley, Dick chose not to answer the radio call, and I was next on the standby list. I could not say much about that, but considered the entire selection system flawed. However, there was nothing else to do but "bite the bullet" and accept the assignment.

After a short wait, we were released. We were than directed to the Twin Peaks area around Vang Vieng, which included a trip to Moung Met where I dropped off a few people. The dirt runway and immediate area appeared devoid of humanity, except for a very good-looking Western woman, who stood patiently in the middle of the strip. Her presence was highly unusual, totally out of character for the remote area. There was a semblance of a road, more like a trail, running through the strip. I thought she might be a reporter recently arrived by bus or an aircraft. She yelled up to me asking if I was going to Vientiane. Of course, I had no intention of acting like a taxi driver, and without proper authorization, even if offered some goodie, could not have taken her anywhere. We returned to Twenty Alternate and completed the day shuttling supplies east.

Before swapping aircraft and leaving for Udorn in Hotel-14 the following morning, I fulfilled my obligation as solicitor and administrator of the Long Tieng upcountry food fund. I paid

the houseboy a hundred baht and presented Jim MacFarlane a 150 dollar check for Bird's shared outlay during the month. I collected from Goddard, who had arrived on the 13th to begin flying as a recently upgraded Captain. The night before, he, Lou McCasland, Steve Stevens, Bobby Nunez, and Art White had hosted a joint Captain upgrading cocktail party at the Club. For most, the event was slightly tardy, as they had already been flying as Captains for some time.

I was happy to get home for, after completion of ten days on the schedule, I was feeling poorly. For some time, headaches, gas, and an uncommon lethargy had bothered me. I had developed colds and felt bad before, but this problem seemed different and was steadily getting worse. I initially thought the complaints might stem from increased work activity. However, after running some basic tests at the Air America clinic and finding nothing conclusive, old Doctor Kao recommended that I go to the Bangkok Christian Hospital to have a complete battery of tests conducted. These would include a liver function test for hepatitis, a nasty disease rarely contracted now since we began taking gamma globulin injections and enjoyed the benefits of the Club's clean food. Eating upcountry was another matter. I did not believe hepatitis was involved, as I checked my eyeballs daily for evidence of yellowing, and they always appeared clear.

The Company had cobbled together a medical insurance plan with the Bangkok hospital that cost only a few dollars a month. It was tailored to supplement the Udorn clinic's inadequacies and poorly stocked facility. To date I had never had an occasion to visit the Bangkok facility.

Bangkok would be a good change, for Udorn had become noticeably colder over the previous two weeks. Beside my medical appointment, Marius Burke and I were scheduled to meet a regional Brunswick Corporation representative to discuss details of a projected bowling business in Kuala Lumpur. While dining at a local restaurant, the man was brutally frank about the business. He cautioned that bowling equipment was very expensive, with eight alleys projected to cost 150,000 dollars.

Added to the cost of a building, that was real money to us. In the past year, other entrepreneurs had shown interest in such a project in Kuala Lumpur. This unforeseen competition and his negative attitude tended to diminish our enthusiasm in the project. Marius, serious about his relationship with a local girl, continued to look for projects.

Not all was lost in Kuala Lumpur. We still counted on the Asian American business and Jim Coble to elevate us all to millionaire status, and permit departure from the thorny Lao work. I was recently elected a director of subsidiary, New Era Lubricants (Malaya) Limited, a waste oil reclamation company in which the parent company had a sizeable stake. Although not yet underway, we all believed the acquisition would eventually prove a highly profitable enterprise. Asian American was also engaged in real estate and aviation sales for future gain, which Coble relished. Lastly, reports arrived that Concrete Masonry would finally begin producing cement blocks, ready for sale in January. Reputedly, local contractors were delaying their work in order to use the company's blocks. Such information buoyed all of our spirits.

Our primary care facility away from Udorn, the Bangkok Christian Hospital was located on the corner of Patpong and Silom roads. Co-founders were American Doctors Welles and Lewis, the only western doctors I ever saw in the facility. Both elderly men looked like they had been there forever. Over time, I discovered the balding Lewis to be the more affable and outgoing of the two. On this trip, I dealt with the sterner Welles, who first gave me a complete physical, ordered a liver function test, and then told me to return in a couple of days to obtain the results. As I was staying at the small motor court Suriwongse Hotel for one hundred baht a night, I was prepared to wait as long as required to find out what was wrong with me.

While in the hospital, I met Howard Estes in the corridor. Since injuring an eyeball on sharp saw grass while evading Pathet Lao on the 16th, he had been in Bangkok for medical treatment. Actually, the primary reason he was in the big city was for Deanie's gall bladder operation. For some time, she was aware of a hiatal hernia condition, an ailment common to heavy people. After suffering continuing chest pains in the vicinity of her diaphragm, she had decided to have the doctors investigate further. The prognosis was gallstones, which required an operation to remove the gallbladder. When I saw her, she appeared in good spirits and was mending nicely.

THE CURSED AMOEBEA

I returned to Doctor Welles's office and was relieved to hear that my liver was fine, effectively ruling out a hepatitis problem. The pragmatic and somewhat crusty Welles then searched his vast store of tropical medical experience and ordered a test for amoebas. I had never heard of the procedure, so he informed me that lately some of the pilots had tested positive for the one-celled animal common in nature, and my symptoms sounded like those associated with amoebiasis. Naturally, I knew what an amoeba was. One of the first tasks of a high school or college biology or zoology student was to study, examine, and draw rhizopodial protozoa seen under the microscope. Locomotion conducted by flowing pseudopod movement was an especially interesting feature.

At first, my personal health precautions in the Far East were generally limited to avoiding ingesting tap water and uncooked food. The Marine Corps way of avoiding local food, water, and women had some established merit, but certainly presented a dull life to a young man. When I first arrived in Thailand with Air America there was little or no advice offered

regarding primary endemic diseases and their avoidance. I did discuss some facets of personal health with medically oriented Captain Jerry McEntee, but these were mostly anecdotal accounts. Our Doctor Ma, a younger counterpart to Doctor Kao, who administered the clinic when Kao was on home leave, occasionally conducted informative health lectures that mainly warned of the danger from endemic tuberculosis in the Northeast. He strongly recommended having potential maids x-rayed at Doctor Kassam's hospital to protect those with families, and he joked about single men being careful about whom one kissed. After hearing this, I thought such an X-ray policy relating to Deanie Estes' revolving door maid policy would send Howard to the poorhouse. Well taken, these suggestions were not timely and failed to prevent damage already incurred. Later, Tom Moher's friend, Sergeant Max Winn, provided me with valuable information about living healthfully in Southeast Asia. Mostly, common sense and basic hygiene had to suffice. Compared to potential gunshot wounds, sickness was a minor risk of our job. Some improvement in overall health had been achieved, for before the introduction of gamma globulin, many individuals had contracted hepatitis. Now the incidence was rare. Other individuals contracted hush-hush social diseases, but that could be controlled by careful selection of partners or abstinence. Mostly by rumor, and long after the fact, we learned not to eat fresh, uncooked vegetables because the amoeba organism might be lurking on them. Even liberally washing lettuce or other vegetables with water might not totally eliminate all of them from crevices and folds. Readily available at local pharmacies, a solution of the chemical compound potassium permanganate mixed in water was recommended to soak vegetables, fruits, and virtually anything fresh that one could not peel. Since preparing and using the purple solution was laborious, I usually avoided eating raw

vegetables, except at certain Bangkok restaurants touted as having "clean" salads. This rumor proved a misleading policy and did not contribute to our good health.

The Bangkok Christian's standard test for the amoeba parasite was unpleasant. Administered by a Thai male orderly, who seemed to gaze lovingly at my naked body, the mixture consisted of a substantial amount of a warm saline enema. This was designed to wash mucosal lining from the intestinal wall of my colon where the beasties thrived. I was embarrassed and had not experienced an enema since my mother occasionally administered them to me as a child. Once filled, I was instructed to hold the movement and fill three paper containers at varying intervals to obtain specimens from the upper colon. These were gathered, capped, labeled, and forwarded to laboratory technicians for examination. I left, but the discomfort was not over. My bowels felt loose, much like Jell-O, for hours afterward.

The following morning, Doctor Welles informed me that the test had proved positive. I was loaded with amoebae parasites. Now that a diagnosis had been made, I was relieved. Welles patiently explained aspects of the cure, and a little more about the amoeba and its associated stages. According to the good Doctor, the active protozoan was easy to eliminate. However, while still in a dormant stage they existed in cysts, something like the hard outer layer of the deadly tetanus spore. Difficult to eliminate, cysts lodged deeply imbedded in the intestinal wall and periodically erupted to re-infect an individual. If not treated, those infected with chronic amoebiasis, chanced having every organ in the body negatively impacted. Much like the liver fluke parasite, I had learned about from Max, this would eventually cause internal abscessing and lead to a premature death.

The information was sobering, and caused me to wonder where and when I might have ingested the amoeba. The first time I recalled eating uncooked veggies was in the fall of 1962 at Luang Prabang, when Duane Hammer recommended the delicious watercress at an outdoor Chinese restaurant. The salad was very good, but at the time, I did not realize that it was a potential time bomb. However, that was so long ago.

I did eat raw green onions along with fried rice at an open-air restaurant in Udorn town that Security Chief Jim Baron recommended. Deposited in a water-filled glass, the onions "appeared" clean. Since then, I had eaten a few "treated" salads at the Keynote Restaurant on Patpong Road that Red Alston and other pilots' swore were "clean." Other than that, using water hauled in and transferred to the tank at Sopa, I hand washed raw tomatoes with soap and water, which I ate at home. Sang did soak veggies in the recommended purple potassium permanganate solution from time to time. The water? Yes, that could be the culprit, for the amoeba cell thrived in water. Except for the watercress, I had never eaten anything raw at out stations, and tried to employ care while brushing my teeth. Food handlers at the Club were supposed to have been trained in basic hygiene and supervised in health matters, but who knew what really occurred behind the scenes? What it all boiled down to, I might have been infected only recently or a couple years ago. Since I had been feeling bad over time, I opted for the latter. Seemingly, the condition was something we had to cope with as long as we lived in Southeast Asia. Since we were all equally exposed, what I failed to understand was why some individuals were more susceptible to the infection than others. All this rumination was fine, but the immediate task was to rid my system of the organism.

The session ended with Welles prescribing three containers of pills to take three times a day over a twenty day period. I was familiar with the first two: Aralen, an anti-malarial drug, and the broad spectrum anti-biotic Tetracycline. The third was an arsenic compound. A poison, arsenic seemed an odd prescription for a human. Welles, who I sensed was still searching for viable cures, indicated that medical people had experimented at length with amoeba eradication. Taken in combination, the three drugs seemed to provide the most efficient cure, and in eliminating the lingering cysts from the body.

During my time in Bangkok, by chance, I bumped into the "Fairy." Still working as a tourist guide, she had recently returned from Japan to visit relatives. While in Nippon land, she had met a one-armed American and indicated that they would marry. The revelation made my heart flutter. Thank God, I thought, perhaps now I was really off the hook with the vindictive witch. When I asked her about the "White Soul" letter written to my folks, she denied any knowledge. Of course, I did not believe her, as she was the only person in the world angry enough with me to have penned such viperous trash. Despite our past acrimony, we enjoyed a pleasant chat and she even assisted with my purchase of Christmas cards.

Before returning to Udorn, I began taking Wells medicine. I thought that I could still fly, but upon return, Doctor Kao checked his flight surgeon's medical book of drugs and said the medicine's toxicity precluded aviation duty, and I was grounded until completing the treatment. I was advised to rest and not ingest any alcohol. Effectively curtailing my social life, except for occasional trips to the Club for mail and dinner, I generally remained at home. To pass the time, Tom Moher and Dick Elder provided interesting books from their library collections

that I read in the morning on my front porch. One Dick provided was titled *Youngblood Hawk*, in which the central character died in the end. Always an emotional person, I was moved to tears.

After two weeks of ingesting the meds, I felt worse than I ever had before. I wondered if Welles' philosophy was to half kill a patient with poison to eliminate all the parasites.

I did not fly again until 9 December. A series of "cures" were prescribed over several years, when I apparently eliminated all traces of the amoeba by consuming hot, spicy Thai food. Before that, my body clearly signaled when I was reaching a borderline tolerance level to the parasites. At such times, I went to Bangkok where tests continued to indicate a positive infestation. Welles later added an additional week to the treatment schedule. That was tough.

Within two years, USIS opened a sizeable library on Patpong Road, where I conducted considerable research on amoebiasis. Studies confirmed what I already knew: That long-term effects of the disease could damage the entire body, to include the brain and liver. I discovered that potassium permanganate, commonly mixed in water as a vegetable soak to kill parasites, was found to be an invalid method. All past recommendations had been Bravo Sierra, for disconcertingly, the chemical did not actually destroy the tough amoeba cyst. Chlorine or total abstinence from consuming vegetables was the only recommended method. I left my reading session quite disheartened.

Virtually every pilot who went to the Bangkok Christian for an amoeba test confirmed positive for parasites. Offering a license to purloin time off the flight schedule, when things became tough upcountry, the word spread rapidly within the pilot community about guaranteed grounding. So many took advantage of the method that Welles commented to me during one visit that the hospital was losing money on dispensed drugs.

Wayne Knight, who never tested positive for amoebas while with Air America, noted unscrupulous pilots that he suspected desired a rest from upcountry work, who went to Bangkok for testing and grounding. Irking him, they generally returned without warning, proclaiming that they were grounded. With pilots still in short supply, the untimely groundings tended to wreak havoc on crew scheduling. One pilot even boasted that he might return for another positive test after completing his medication. When management began complaining about losing assets, Doctor Kao visited Doctor Welles to discuss the issue. After a thorough investigation, Welles admitted that his laboratory technicians often failed to adequately clean dirty test tubes. This likely contributed to almost one hundred percent positive tests. Substantial effort was expended to discover another cure that did not prevent a pilot from flying. Abadie became the point man in the search. Finally, an alternate treatment for amoebas was discovered through the auspices of U.S. Embassy facilities. This helped remedy the situation and greatly reduced the frequency of positive testing. ¹

I always attempted to time groundings with back-to-back STOs or home leave to minimize downtime from the flight schedule. After many years, I finally tested negative for parasites. In 1965, Company RON facilities were erected upcountry that provided decent food and hot water showers, and generally more healthful living conditions prevailed. However, I mainly attributed the change in my condition to a recommended modification in diet: i.e. consuming quantities of peppery hot garlic-laden Thai food. None of the middle-class Thai people with whom I was acquainted complained of amoeba infestation. I

¹ EW Knight Email.

was aware that some of their resistance to diseases, so injurious to a Westerner, was acquired at birth, or perhaps after years of exposure. It appeared that the common denominator to their apparent lack of parasite problems was food, hence switching to their diet made sense. In addition to adding flavor and tasting good, the chemical capsaicin contained in the peppers tended to trigger a bodily response that shed intestinal lining during daily eliminations. In contrast to the horrible drug side effects, this method seemed less invasive and provided a far more innocuous toll on my body.

By the fall of 1964, upgraded versions of the USAF HH-43Fs were forwarded to Southeast Asia for military SAR work. However, the first F-models were stationed at Da Nang and Bien Hoa, South Vietnam. A considerable improvement over B-models, the retrofitted models incorporated a larger Lycoming T-53-11A engine rated at 1,250 shaft horsepower. A 350-gallon self-sealing fuel tank was installed to increase effective combat range from seventy five to one hundred twenty nautical miles. To enhance combat protection, 800 pounds of titanium armor surrounded the crew compartment and engine cowling. A 250-foot cable was fitted to the hoist system to better effect rescues in the dense forests that included very tall trees. Existing UHF avionics equipment was augmented with VHF and FM radios.

Perhaps the most innovative development for the rescue unit came in the form of a jungle penetrator. Previous extraction devices tangled in tree branches of the dense triple canopy jungles. Attached to the hoist cable, shaped like a heavy metal plum bob, the mechanism was designed to drop through jungle foliage with minimum interference. Then, if able, the downed crewman released spring-loaded arms to sit on and strapped himself to the penetrator. Depending on conditions, weight factors, and if the situation warranted, the device might accommodate up to three men. If the man was injured and unable to help himself, the penetrator allowed a crewmember to journey to the ground, attend to the man, and return to the cabin section with him.

On 1 November, Viet Cong infiltrators struck the Bien Hoa base in South Vietnam. Five mixed model Huskies were damaged or destroyed, drastically reducing the more combat worthy F-models in the theater. During November, HH-43B squadrons relocated from South Vietnam to Nakhon Phanom and Takhli to replace temporary units (TDY) at those stations. Too far from the Lao border to be useful in any SAR situation, the HH-43Bs at Korat and Takhli were utilized only as base firefighting assets. Although the NKP unit, designated Yankee Team SAR, lacked the range to cover northern Laos (Military Reegion Two) or the Bolovens Plateau area west of Attopeu (Military Region Four), squadron members did not lack courage or the enthusiasm to learn and serve. To extend combat range, innovative hardware was manufactured to hand pump a drum of fuel into the tank while airborne. Using this messy and potentially dangerous method, loaded down with two pilots and a crew chief-gunner, and equipment, we occasionally led them through Military Region Two to acquire knowledge of terrain and countryside. However, it was apparent to all concerned that the machine could not hack the range or power requirements for high mountain work.

PILOTS DOWN

As I was preparing to leave for Bangkok for a medical examination, the war heated up in the Panhandle. Continuing interdiction pressure on enemy logistic routes, RLAFF T-28 pilots, supported by Yankee Team reconnaissance planes and escorts, struck positions northeast of Tchepone on the 16th and 17th. The month long record of no lost U.S. military planes ended during the late morning of the 18th, when a F-100 pilot, call sign Ball Three, escorting a Yankee Team reconnaissance plane, was splashed by AAA ground fire near the border town of Ban Senphan in Military Region Three.

Marking the largest SAR effort to date in Laos, air assets were quickly marshaled for the SAR mission. After receiving a "Dropkick" signal, the Air America Operations Manager diverted a C-123 to act as Victor Control, recon the area, and act as on site airborne control until the USAF HU-16, Tacky-44, arrived from Korat RTAFB. Loaded with retrofitted communications radios, one of two Albatross aircraft was always on standby status. Planned for command, control, search, and water rescue, the planes provided marginal equipment for the job, but were the only ones available when the Lao mission began.

The airborne command and control (ABCC) function included relay of SAR communications to ground controllers in Thailand and South Vietnam rescue centers, and to control of rescue forces. The ABCC crew determined what assets were required, briefed planes on the location, condition of survivors, and disposition of enemy, and then worked with the on scene commander to direct the assets in the recovery operation.

When the Tacky commander assumed control from the C-123 PIC, he requested U.S. Navy "Sandys" (AD-4s) from the fleet. ¹ Taking advantage of their considerable loiter time and ordnance capability, six Sandys attacked enemy positions, receiving flack and small arms fire in return. Throughout the day, thirteen F-105s, six Navy A-1Es, and eight F-100s participated in the SAR. Marking their first sortie into Laos from Nakhon Phanom, two HH-43s, escorted by Navy pilots, Pansy 88-89, searched without discovering the downed pilot.

As Panhandle operations and any losses were highly sensitive items, Ambassador Unger was busy sending initial and follow up messages to Washington regarding State's interest in the SAR operations. By early afternoon, a reconnaissance

¹ Sandy became the call sign throughout the war for helicopter escort assets during SAR missions.

aircraft, two H-34s flown by Captains Marius Burke and Bobby Nunez, and four T-28s flown by Alpha pilots were sent to Savannakhet to standby and assist as necessary. After a recon, a SAR effort by Air America personnel was deemed justified with a possibility of success without undue risk. Therefore, Unger elected to launch the Air America armada.

Refueling at Savannakhet, C-123 pilots remained in the area throughout the day to cover and coordinate with the two H-34s and four Alpha crews briefly used in the search. By late afternoon, with no sign of the F-100 pilot, Air America planes and helicopters dispersed for the night, with the provision to reassemble should the need arise the following day. The C-123 crews returned to the Vientiane base. With T-28 services available at Savannakhet from the RLAF, T-28 pilots and H-34 crews remained at that facility.

The following day, joined by four F-105s, two HU-16s departed Korat and returned to the crash site. By mid-morning, a Tacky-45 crewmember sighted a parachute and aircraft wreckage on a karst fifty yards from an enemy AAA site. While F-105 pilots blasted the gun position, as so often would plague us in the future, Tacky called NKP before a positive pilot sighting, and requested HH-43 helicopter and T-28 escort support. However, poor local weather conditions in the region delayed a launch for four hours.

During the Air Force activity, Dick Elder and Ed Reid, not scheduled to fly that day, were eating breakfast in the Club Rendezvous dining room. Abadie entered the room and asked them to participate in the ongoing SAR. Time constrained, not dressed in normal flight uniforms, they flew in civvies to NKP in the rear seats of two Alpha pilot-driven T-28s. The H-34 crews who repositioned there earlier, had topped off, and were waiting for information. As per established double crew SOPs, Dick joined

Scratch Kanach and Rick Decosta. Ed Reid teamed with Bobby Nunez and his Flight Mechanic.

With the HH-43s still grounded by adverse weather, Air America helicopters and planes departed from their respective sites and joined in a four aircraft unit for the crash area. Circumnavigating to avoid known AAA sites, they proceeded northeast across the heavily blanketed needlepoint karst area north of Thakhet. Then, when approaching Mahaxay, Tacky-45 vectored them east toward the target area. Nearing the site, they were directed to the pilot sighting, located about ten miles southwest of Mugia Pass in a karst complex, just east of the main road from the pass.

About 1320 hours Reid spotted a parachute draped over a rocky limestone ledge, two hundred feet below the summit, and fifty meters southeast of the F-100 wreckage. Obviously injured and unconscious, the pilot was unresponsive to repeated flybys. Upon closer investigation, the pilot was noted lodged in a crack six feet below the ledge. From Ed's vantage point, it appeared the pilot ejected just prior to impact. He speculated that the chute had deployed, but failed to fully open. Consequently, the pilot hit the karst with bone crushing speed.

With no enemy ground fire observed and no landing spot available, Bobby hovered fifty feet above the pilot, very close to the rock cliff. As Nunez was totally engaged in hovering, Ed climbed down into the cabin. Then, assisted by the Flight Mechanic, he rode the hoist's horse collar to the ledge. Wearing a "T" shirt, shorts, and shower shoes, Ed experienced difficulty standing on the ledge. Exacerbating the situation, the Flight Mechanic continuously adjusted the hoist cable to enable Reid to bend over to grab the parachute. Nearing the pilot, Ed could smell decomposition. Finally, Reid attached the parachute to the hoist. After giving a universal thumb up gesture, both he and

the deceased pilot were hoisted toward the cabin. Ed entered the cabin, but the pilot still hung in the parachute.

Since Nunez had conducted precision hovering for twenty minutes, Reid climbed back into the cockpit to provide whatever assistance was necessary. Then, to prevent the chute from fouling the tail or main rotor blades, Bobby hovered off the hill close to the road and landed in an abandoned rice paddy. Then while Reid monitored the controls, Nunez and the Flight Mechanic exited the helicopter, rolled the pilot into the parachute, and loaded him into the cabin section. As Ed scanned the area for trouble, he noted stacks of wooden crates hidden under trees across the road.

After retrieving the quick and the dead, they departed the area for the Nakhon Phanom base, where facility Doctor Cook pronounced the pilot dead on arrival (DOA). While they refueled for the trip to Udorn, Elder noted that Bobby was soaked with sweat from the ordeal. In addition, he considered the recovery one of the most difficult acts of flying skill he had ever witnessed.

Marius Burke, then one of the new T-28 Alpha pilots, snapped several photos of the hoist operation. Air Force intelligence technicians in the photo laboratory across the taxiway from the Air America compound developed and enlarged the pictures. Using stereoscopic lenses, they discovered a massive truck farm containing ammunition vehicles and other war materiel next to the karst. Because of the expert camouflage, the pilots never saw the facility.

CPH Knight recalled Nunez being extremely hyperactive after landing at Udorn. During Reid's debriefing, always a difficult person while discussing any subject, he failed to heap praise on Nunez for maintaining a steady hover, while he rode the hoist down to the pilot. Considering this, and as Nunez was a new

person and newbies did not deserve praise, Wayne thought it could have merely been Reid's way, and he actually respected Nunez' stellar participation.

A day after the recovery, Colonel Jack McCreery, Deputy Commander, 2nd Air Division representative in Udorn, forwarded what probably was the first of its kind message to Dave Hickler from Saigon-based Commanding Officer General Moore. It stated:

"Pass to appropriate Air America personnel. I wish to express my deep appreciation to all concerned for the splendid rescue operations conducted in connection with the loss of the F-100 yesterday. I was particularly impressed with the unhesitating response and the aggressiveness with which everyone pressed on with the mission. Such coordinated action between military and civilian units is cause for deep gratification."

McCreery, a respected and well-liked person in our community, added a cover letter:

"...my appreciation and feeling of respect for your aircrews, their professionalism, utter disregard for personal safety and devotion to duty."

Following the loss of the F-100 and Captain William R. Martin, the PACAF Commanding Officer, intending to send a stern message to Hanoi, demanded that CINCPAC authorize an immediate USAF strike on enemy positions near Mugia Pass, using napalm and cluster bomb units (CBU). However, Admiral Sharp, believing President Johnson's people would not authorize such a mission, squelched the request. ²

² Segment Sources:
Earl Tilford, 53-55,63.
Bill Leary 1964 Notes, UTD.
Leonard Unger to State, 11/18-19/64.
Jacob Van Staaveren, 42.
Marius Burke, Interview at the Author's House, 05/30/98.
Marius Burke Email, 03/18/09.
EW Knight, Emails, 07/04/00, 07/06/00.

The nightmare for friendly aircrews continued. While Reid and Nunez were recovering the F-100 pilot's remains, two T-28s with four Air Commandos onboard disappeared over Laos. It was not the first time American pilots had suffered losses flying the T-28 in Southeast Asia. Soon after the machine's arrival and activation in the Lao theater, structural failure caused two T-28s to shed wings during dive bombing runs in South Vietnam. Secured to the fuselage by only four bolts, the wings had to be stoutly reinforced and pilots cautioned not to exceed VNE (velocity not to exceed) in a dive.

The two T-28 crews departed Udorn on a ferry flight to Saigon. Radar contact was lost at 1430 hours, 4,000-foot twenty two miles northwest of Tchepone. ³ Unless some intelligence gathering hanky-panky was going on, I could not understand what they were doing in that area at a low altitude.

With the jet pilot SAR complete, an extensive search by four F-100s, four F-105s and two HU-16s failed to discover any sign of the men and machines. By the time I wrote home about the incident on the 26th, they were still missing.

Since Air America was initially busy with other SARs, Bird & Son pilot Jim MacFarlane, who had already participated in three SARs, searched for three days comprising a total of twenty one hours. In a joint Air America-Bird effort, the search encompassed several Lao sectors and many planes. Jim's assigned sector was generally east of Savannakhet over the trail and into Vietnam. He flew a Dornier for two days and a Cessna Wren the other.

In a slightly different version, MacFarlane recalled the two T-28 aircraft departed Wattay Airport on a flight to Danang.

³ This was the scuttlebutt being disseminated at the time.

One pilot was Gus Albrect, with whom Air America fixed wing Captain Bill Donovan was well acquainted. Another was a former Washington Redskins quarterback. The search was extensive because the planes were fully loaded with ordnance when leaving Wattay, and someone theorized that they had strayed off course while looking for targets of opportunity, and were shot down.

For three days, in what he recalled as outstanding military-civilian coordination, Jim received support from the USS *Ticonderoga* positioned in the Tonkin Gulf. The ABCC Albatross from Korat coordinated radio communications on UHF with the ship and ADs, for the Bird plane was only equipped with VHF. Each day, he was provided four ADs fully loaded with bombs, rockets, and guns. While flying over hostile territory at 3,000-feet, AD pilots escorted him on each wing. The ADs were able to remain on station until late in the day, at which time at bingo fuel, they returned to the carrier. During the course of the SAR, he was informed that two F-105 pilots were continuously aloft performing MiG CAP, as was a KC-135 fuel tanker.

Much of his twenty one hours entailed flying along the network of trails near the eastern border. During this time, he never saw a human; all the villages were vacated. Even the animals were gone. Bill Donovan searched with him one day in another plane. They observed many empty gun emplacements. Hoping to see the ADs in action, they swooped down dropping smoke grenades to draw fire, but never received any.

On the 24th, two sorties of two RF-101Cs photographed the T-28s proposed flight path. The pictures failed to reveal the location of the missing aircraft and the Third Air Division terminated the airborne search.

Several weeks later, Jim learned that the T-28s were discovered near Danang on the west side of a tall mountain. The pilots had been flying IMC too low. However, Donovan suggested

that the planes were shot down at the location by gunfire from above. ⁴

The spate of bad luck in the Panhandle continued when a USAF RF-101C was downed at 1145 hours, forty miles east of Thakhet. It was the first Voodoo loss in Southeast Asia. Captain Burton Walz was photographing the enemy gun positions that downed Ball Three at Ban Phan Nop when his aircraft was hit. While the plane caught fire and began spinning out of control, friendly air observed the Captain punching out. Near the ground, his parachute caught in a tall tree, the canopy tore, and he plunged to the ground, badly injuring himself. Since Air America assets were at Savannakhet working or standing by for the T-28 SAR, Ambassador Unger released them to attempt the rescue.

Dick Crafts, a member of a relatively new contingent of Alphas that included Al Rich, Lyons, Blalock, and Marius Burke selected for the T-28 program after some original pilots' dispute over compensation with Fred Walker, participated in the SAR. He noted the eight T-28s were B and C models. Most displayed Lao markings, but some had none. The pilots attempted to fly all eight aircraft, but maintenance and other considerations usually produced only four airworthy enough to launch. The pilots were remunerated in cash, eighty dollars to climb into the cockpit plus fifty dollars per hour if ordnance was expended.

Within an hour of ejection, an unspecified Air America helicopter pilot retrieved Walz without incident. He was flown to Korat, where the doctor determined his injuries included

⁴ Edward Greenhalgh, *Voodoo*, 64.
Messages Vientiane to State, 11/20/64.
James M. MacFarlane Letter to Author Tim Castle, 05/13/88.
Author Letter Home.

broken ribs, a compound fracture of the left leg, a dislocated shoulder, and other less serious broken bones.

The result of Air America's participation in the successful SARs was that the U.S. military liked the way we operated. Despite the presence of H-43 assets at Nakhon Phanom, they wanted us to continue the work. Therefore, it looked like the SAR business would constitute an adjunct to our normal work for the foreseeable future.

With three SARs compressed into a short time period, Ambassador Unger's Country Team requested through the AIRA pipeline that all Yankee Team and other military missions (U-2), except SAR, shutdown until reasons for the downing could be reviewed and recommendations forwarded.

The flap continued on an upper echelon level with a PACAF general bypassing CINCPAC and recommending a retaliatory strike mission to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. They concurred, with General Curtis Lemay recommending flak suppression missions. However, civilians micro-managing the war in the Johnson Administration, not desiring to escalate the situation, refused to authorize any action. If any good came out of the discussions, it stimulated a clearer definition of medium altitude in relation to the rules of engagement. ⁵

B-803

The existence of "round eyed" pilots flying in a neutral country was difficult to deny should they be captured or killed while downed over enemy territory, especially during special

⁵ Earl Tilford, 55.
Leonard Unger to State, 11/21/64 (2).
Edward Greenhalgh, 63,64, 161.
William Leary Notes.
Jacob Van Staaveren, 42.
Author's 11/16/64 Letter Home.

missions. Thai men, although not exactly the same stature as Lao, were measurably more easily deniable than Americans. This, plus their aviation experience level, was the primary reason they were initially tapped to fill the void in RLAFF pilot ranks. In the early 1960s, Thai Captain Boonrat Comintra had flown T-6, and then later T-28 missions in Laos. ^{6 7}

To fulfill the plausible deniability factor (a charming phrase used by diplomats and Agency personnel) preferred in neutral Laos, the Agency formed the all Asian-crewed, Boun Oum Airways (BOA). Like Bird Air was to Air America, so BOA was to both American piloted companies: a cover "competitor." BOA began small with Air America supplying maintenance and a Helio Courier, while Bird and Son provided a twin engine Dornier. As the operation expanded, BOA "leased" C-47s for supply work. I was only involved with BOA pilots once, and this episode will be related in a future book.

One of the first pilots hired for BOA, the talented and friendly Thai, Boonrat Comintra, became very popular with local Agency personnel, who were always looking for non-round-eye, deniable Asian talent to conduct clandestine work. Consequently, with Agency blessing, Boonrat was trained at Nong Khai by civilian Bird and Son pilot, Bob Hamblin, to fly the Dornier, and the Helio Courier by Air America Captain Jim Rhyne.

Boonrat first worked out of Nakhon Phanom. The Helio was used exclusively at night to airdrop supplies to indigenous road watch personnel, who were generating targeting information and

⁶ In the second book, *The Crotch*, I described four aircraft heading west across the Mekong from Savannakhet that jumped me while descending toward Mukdahan.

⁷ Boonrat Comintra was later hired to fly UH-34D helicopters for Air America.

intelligence from high mesas in and around Mugia Pass, and other areas in Military Region Three.

Envisioning a requirement to further support these valuable troops by landing at their site for the sick, lame, and lazy, in October, Boonrat, who had gained helicopter experience with the Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF), was tapped to begin training in Air America's only Bell 47G-2 helicopter, B-803. To legitimize this action, the aircraft was leased to Boun Oum Airways. Long desiring a permanent contract for the all-but-abandoned machine, the Company was elated to place the helicopter on an actual revenue earning contact.

B-803 was purchased from Kawasaki Bell, Japan, in the fall of 1959. When Jack Forney was hired as Chief Flight Mechanic, the machine was located at Tainan Taiwan. It was hangared there and used to assist in obtaining helicopter experience for the original four Air America fixed wing pilots assigned to fly H-19As in Laos. Taking advantage of the Company-supplied training aircraft, Herb Lee flew the machine around the field once every two weeks. After the need for the machine waned, hoping to find a revenue contract, it was reassigned and shipped to Udorn after Wayne Knight arrived in November 1961. For a long time, the helicopter sat at the far end of the taxiway along with junked Marine equipment and stacked Beaver planes.

Former bush pilot Skip Halsey and a Flight Mechanic were hired early in 1962 to fly B-803, for a low-level operation envisioned out of Thakhet. According to Skip's credentials, he had logged experience flying Bell-47s in Alaska. Three former Army pilots flying H-34s out of Udorn also knew him. However, with a viable Bell program still in limbo, Skip transitioned to the H-34.

Jack Connor was also hired in 1962 to exclusively fly the Bell, but when VPFO Rousselot saw how large Jack actually was



C.J. Abadie's comely wife Lek, sitting on the forward right crosstube of Company owned Bell 47G-2, B-803 parked at the west end of the facility's laterite parking ramp.

CJ Abadie Collection.

during the Taipei interview, he requested that H-43 pilot Billy Zeitler journey to Taipei to attend ground school and take the Chinese examination for certification. ⁸ It was a hurry-up process, with the end result largely preordained. After arriving, Zeitler was immediately administered the radio portion of the comprehensive test. To expedite passing the exam, he was provided with a script to read into a tape recorder. The more difficult written test was scheduled on the following day.

While in Taipei Bill met fellow employees Jim Rhyne (DOH 07/07/62), Jack Connor, Bob Belmar, George Verdon, Don Romes (DOH 07/07/62), and Ben Franklin (DOH 25/06/62). All the pilots were in the process of studying for and taking the Chinese licensing test. One man had already failed and opted for a makeup test. Since all the men had been studying for a month, Billy wondered how he would ever pass the vaunted exam in a short time. However, as with the radio portion of the test, the fix was in, and with his passing preordained, he departed Taipei.

Bill deadheaded on a C-46 to Kai Tak Airport, Hong Kong, and RON there the first night. The following day, he continued to Danang, South Vietnam, before boarding a plane for the final leg to Vientiane. From the Lao administrative capital, he caught a ride to Udorn in the afternoon on a returning H-34. The exercise had all been easy.

CJ Abadie subsequently provided Zeitler's Bell check ride at Udorn.

After its arrival in Udorn, except to occasionally start the engine obtaining pressures, temperatures, to lubricate seals, mostly management types operated the largely disused bubble type helicopter around the field.

⁸ Flying Company Chinese B registered aircraft for Air America first required obtaining a Chinese license.

From the beginning, few pilots wanted to fly the non-supercharged, underpowered Bell in Laos, mainly because it only included routine work, like paymaster and light observation missions. This was still during a time when hazard pay and overtime in the H-34 provided fat paychecks. Additionally, the Bell was limited in range and load capability; the pilot was generally alone while conducting missions, which required him to perform all fueling away from his base; and the relatively low-level flying missions necessitated that he keep current on ground activities. In contrast, although certainly more risky, the H-19A pilots, who had previously flown low level missions in southern Laos, were not as concerned about the operation.

Once the H-34 became the standard helicopter in the Air America inventory, most local management personnel believed that the small Bell could only provide a limited function. However, Company personnel wanted to maintain and utilize it, for reasons not entirely clear to Udorn people. ⁹ Whenever Taipei inquired if Udorn management could generate a use for it, the answer was always yes, for no one knew when existing line helicopters might be deleted from the inventory, or when a contract for the Bell might materialize.

With no permanent job or requirement, B-803 was rarely employed in Laos. In the spring of 1963, after several attempts to place the machine in an airworthy condition, Skip Halsey and his Flight Mechanic were assigned to work in Laos for a week. Soon after arriving at Thakhet, they grounded the machine, citing an excessively loose tail rotor control pitch change unit.

⁹ This may have been related to how the machine was originally obtained and how to justify retaining it.

Abadie possessed a Chinese license and was rated in the Bell. On the day it was released to work the Thakhet locale, he flew B-803 on a maintenance test flight. Declaring the machine airworthy, he released it for operations. Puzzled and perplexed over the grounding, he and Jack Forney reviewed previous maintenance log squawks and researched its history. Discovering nothing out of the ordinary to warrant the grounding, a H-34 pilot ferried them to Thakhet. While the management team investigated the problem, Halsey and his Flight Mechanic were sent back to Udorn.

Jack conducted a detailed inspection and found nothing that would contribute to the machine's grounding. Following Forney's determination, Abadie decided to flight test the aircraft. He cranked the helicopter up, hovered for thirty minutes, shook it, and attempted everything he could possibly think of to determine the problem and isolate a flaw. While flying patterns around the field, he felt only normal shakes and bumps he associated with B-803. He thought that if a pilot could not fly the machine with inherent vibrations, then he should not fly it at all. Once convinced that the Bell was indeed airworthy, he informed Forney it was safe and they returned it to Udorn.

Later, Abadie summoned Halsey to his office and terminated him for what he believed were unnecessary Bell groundings and other associated activities. The Flight Mechanic was also fired.

Billy Zeitler replaced Halsey as primary Bell-47 pilot. His Flight Mechanic was Conrad Daigle. On the way to Thakhet to work for a Customer named Tom, the reciprocating engine failed, blowing two cylinders, which forced him to autorotate onto the laterite Nakhon Phanom road. Daigle also enjoyed the forced landing. Bill did not fly the machine again until Air America began supporting people from the U.S. Department of Interior conducting surveys and gathering soil samples for the Mekong

River Project. He did this sporadically in 1964 when not flying the H-34.

After Zeitler was shot down in August, ACP Marius Burke, who also possessed a Chinese license for B registered Bells, flew with Jack Connor on a couple of proficiency flights at Udorn. With big Jack and Marius in the cockpit and full fuel, it was virtually impossible to hover. They had to slide the machine off the grass median to attain sufficient lift and become airborne. After his release, Connor assumed primary Bell pilot status and Zeitler's duties.

Early in November 1964, Boonrat commenced transition and proficiency training in B-803 with local Air America management pilots for the purpose of accomplishing clandestine Customer work in Laos. At the same time, Bird and Son pilot Bob Hamblin also started Bell training with CPH Wayne Knight and ACPH Marius Burke. Bob, not considered an Agency type, still enjoyed a close special relationship with Pat Landry, for the two organizations shared an office in the AB-1 warehouse across the taxiway from the Air America facility. Although Hamblin was not "witting" and not deemed a mole embedded to monitor helicopter operations for the Agency, he was Boonrat's mentor.¹⁰ For this reason, he might have received Bell training for the purpose of actively assisting the Thai pilot. More likely, Bob functioned as a primary or backup pilot for Military Region Three road watch support. Whatever the intention, Hamblin's Bell training was abbreviated, either because of a lack of progress, or a higher echelon decision to use the more deniable Boonrat.

Because Boonrat had accumulated sufficient helicopter experience while flying in the RTAF, his Bell transition

¹⁰ Witting: A euphemism employed by the Agency for vetted personnel, briefed on CIA origins, and "need to know" affairs.

conducted by Knight and Burke was relatively effortless, and he was quickly released to conduct Agency work in Military Region Three. His first helicopter mission was scheduled to the "Yankee Pad," a remote observation site located in mountains high above the Mugia area that changed position over the years as enemy probes dictated. Since secrecy and compartmentalization was required and implemented for all such special missions, there was no knowledge or support for the operation from Udorn, even from those who were "witting."

B-803s first road watch mission proved less than a momentous occasion. On 21 November, after retrieving an ill operative, and while hovering to depart the high elevation at Yankee Pad, 803s reciprocating engine failed. As a result, the Savannakhet Customer was forced to breach tight security and dispatch a H-34 pilot to retrieve Boonrat. For a time, the incident ended the experiment employing a small Bell helicopter flown by a Thai pilot to support remote clandestine locations. The aircraft was recovered and repaired at a cost of 9,000 dollars. Wayne Knight, who had participated in the previous training and maintenance of the machine, conducted two test flights the following month.

Despite the untimely crash, Boonrat's demonstrated helicopter expertise was later utilized when, in the latter part of 1966, he became one of the first three experienced and talented Thai pilots to enter the Air America UH-34D program. ¹¹

¹¹ Segment Sources:

Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 121.

Marius Burke Interview, 05/30/98.

Bill Zeitler Emails, 05/22/02, 05/24/02, 05/25/02.

Joe Leeker, Air America Bell 47s.

EW Knight Email, 04/30/00.

On 25 November, President Johnson nominated career diplomat William Sullivan as Ambassador to Laos, replacing Leonard Unger. ¹

Bill Sullivan had previously served as the Special Assistant to the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs. As Averell Harriman's handpicked protégé and his Chief Deputy, he had participated in negotiating the 1961-1962 multi-nation Geneva Accords settlement on Laos in Switzerland. During an especially dark period in Laos, their negotiations prevented the communists from taking over the entire country and enabled the government to retain a neutral stance. Well informed on USG's Southeast Asian policy, as a Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs to the Secretary of State under Ambassador Maxwell Taylor, he was acquainted with Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, and had chaired a Vietnam Working Group during the 1964 critical planning period. The committee, staffed with representatives from all top departments, was charged with planning and managing the Vietnam problem. During the final months of 1964, much emphasis was placed on the feasibility of bombing the logistical arteries through Laos and North Vietnam. Sullivan impressed those he associated and worked with so much that superiors Bundy and Taylor recommended his early appointment for the Lao Ambassadorship.

Sullivan arrived and presented his credentials to King Vathana in early December. Happy to be departing the boiling caldron, Unger had paid his dues during his tenure, and war

¹ Leonard Unger departed Laos on 1 December to assume the position of Special Assistant to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs. Later he became the U.S. Ambassador to Thailand.

plans for the country were well established. Procedures (SOPs) were in place for SARs, T-28 usage, and other operations. From the beginning, the new ambassador continued the policy of daily meetings with all the chiefs of the mission and agencies (Country Team). During these meetings and private sessions with the Agency Chief of Station (COS) and embassy attaches, Sullivan tweaked, developed, and administered the burgeoning conflict.

For four and a half years, he directed a defensive war of a largely guerrilla nature and gradually increased operations in response to increasingly aggressive Vietnamese actions. Because of the war's unconventional structure, Washington granted him almost carte blanche concerning all facets of the Lao war. For this reason, his absolute authority was noted and recognized by military and civilian upper echelons. Those in the U.S. military, resenting his power and strict adherence to the façade of a "neutral" Laos, sarcastically referred to him as "The Field Marshall."

When Sullivan arrived in Vientiane, the North Vietnamese were largely deployed in Military Region Two and Military Region Three, supporting two separate objectives. Their largest presence was concentrated in the Panhandle area, with two divisions of regular troops building, repairing, and improving roads winding south into South Vietnam. In upper Military Region Two, the 316th division rotated units yearly into Laos during the long dry season. During that period, they harassed and fought the Meo, seized villager's rice and opium crops, and withdrew to northwestern North Vietnam around Son La, to rest and refit during the rainy season. ²

In what became a yearly *modus operandi* for Long Tieng Case Officers and Vang Pao's operations in Military Region Two, when

² I would experience a hairy SAR in this area in June of 1965.

pressured, Meo forces fell back to safe positions instead of attempting to hold high ground, a policy of living to fight another day. Exacting an impressive toll, they savagely ambushed pursuers. Key civilians remaining in villages provided Vang Pao, et. al. intelligence regarding enemy movement. Then, with enemy vehicles stretched thin along supply roads, which negated employing large troop movements, tactical plans were hastily implemented, whereby small Meo units attacked, denying critical food supplies to isolated troop units. After drawing the hungry troops out of captured villages to more exposed positions, crews flying versatile H-34s delivered troops to nearby hills to commence attacks. This procedure was used to excellent advantage many times toward the end of the dry season. Aware of the yearly historical withdrawal route of the 316th Division in the wet season, leap-frogging helicopters were utilized to ferry blocking forces to positions east of the PDJ along Route-7. Once in place, Meo irregulars, employing tactics much like battle plans of former dominate sea power nations' ships of the line maneuvering to crossing the "T", ambushed columns. They then attempted to divide and concentrate enemy units into small areas like a valley, for air assets to devastate their ranks.

Guerrilla warfare of the type used by Vang Pao's warriors, all essential for ultimate success, depended on several pertinent factors. They included timely intelligence from spies or road watch teams, good communications capability, concentrations of friendly populations for ease of movement, fierce warriors, and speedy helicopter mobility. In contrast to PL and Vietnamese forces, only a small number of Meo troops were used during the operations. Lightning combat techniques were calculated to inflict maximum losses on the enemy, while minimizing VP's casualties. Over the period involved, and until the enemy radically changed its tactics in later years, the

battle plan remained highly successful. The policy did not allow the RLG to obtain much territory, but for a few years, tended to thwart North Vietnamese ability to consolidate annual gains.

Sullivan stated in his Book *Obbligato*:

"By the time I left in 1969, we had a Meo infantry of nearly 40,000 men, an airlift of transport and helicopters operating over 50 aircraft in Laos, and an attack force with about 100 propeller driven aircraft out of Thailand. I never had more than 250 Americans in Laos at any time coordinating and supporting these operations. A few of them were military personnel on special detail for short periods. Most were young paramilitary specialists from CIA or contract civilians hired through the Agency in such corporations as Air America..."

After obtaining witting status in Taipei, CPH Wayne Knight conducted periodic visits to the Vientiane Embassy for important meetings. He met both Unger and Sullivan at different times, but never dealt directly with either man. Country Team sessions were conducted in what was called the "Plastic Cocoon." A soundproof chamber was located deep in the bowels of the embassy. Mounted on stiff springs, the clear, plastic shell was isolated from the embassy proper. It was necessary to step over a gap between the main building and the shell. After the translucent door was secured, occupants were completely sealed off from the outside world. While sitting at a conference table that accommodated forty people, it appeared that listening devices would be impossible to hide because everything was visible through the walls, floor, and ceiling. Wayne noted a low humming sound that could have been an added sound jamming precaution, or merely an

air conditioner.³

Harking closely to Tony Poe's biased opinions, we were not unhappy to see the perceived ultra-conservative Leonard Unger depart our theater. We were impatient to win and heaped blame on the ambassador for a no-win policy and long delays before launching on SAR missions. Indeed, when he was not immediately found to make a decision, we humorously alluded to him hiding under his bed. Tony was happy over William Sullivan's arrival. He erroneously believed USG-State Department policy would radically change, allowing us to win or make huge strides in the Lao conflict. Unfortunately, Poe did not understand the geopolitical "Big Picture" any more than we did. As the war dragged on with the same defensive and holding policy as before, he became increasingly disillusioned with the ambassador.

³ Segment Sources:

John Bowman, Almanac 510.

Memorandum of Conversation Between Dean Rusk and Phoumi Nosavan, 12/03/64.

William Sullivan, *Obbligato: Notes on a Foreign Service Career 1939-1979* (New York: Norton) 210-212.

EW Knight Email, 05/03/01.

The lengthy supply network of roads trails, streams, and rivers winding along high ranges of the Annamite Mountain chain geographically dividing Vietnam from Laos became generically known to the spoon fed American public as "The Ho Chi Minh Trail." ¹ Eventually consisting of many main and sub-trails, the extensive system coursed through some of the most physical challenging topography existing anywhere on earth. This included tropical jungle, dense forests, and steep, rocky mountains. Considered an engineering miracle, continuous development and increased use of the trails to supply Viet Cong guerrillas in the South attested to the persistence and ingenuity of a militaristic people bent on winning the Second Indochina War and reuniting the south with the north.

In concert with the decision to assimilate the South into the Democratic Vietnamese Republic (DVR), during May 1959, North Vietnamese leaders had clandestinely decided to support their military southern arm using remote trails. Infiltration south over the demilitarized zone (DMZ) was envisioned along Route-9, and then through nine way stations. Construction began in June by the 559th Transportation Group and reached the A Chau Valley in August. By spring of 1960, South Vietnamese intelligence sources informed USG that enemy guerrillas were infiltrating the country.

Because the overall distance from Hanoi to the Mekong Delta was markedly shorter through Laos, deception simpler, and was largely uncontested, in early 1961 North Vietnamese leaders

¹ As opposed to the Americanized version, the North Vietnamese called their logistic system the Trong Son Strategic Supply Route.

elected to extend the trail through that country. Further contributing to the decision to develop new logistic arteries, the North Vietnamese Army had already acquired valuable experience and area familiarity during their 1953-54 incursion through Laos into Cambodia.

After paralleling a stream for almost twenty miles through Laos, the first trail entered South Vietnam north of Route-9 at the border's northwest corner. Narrow paths were initially considered adequate for couriers and small combat units. Later, with the U.S. tendering South Vietnam military support, Northern leaders realized that additional assistance was required in the South. To achieve this goal, they lobbied for an ambitious construction plan to push further west into Laos.

The few passes into Laos through the towering Annamite chain were located at relatively low elevations that cut through rugged terrain, which consisted of rushing streams, deep ravines, and thick jungle. Two northern passes leading to Military Region Three, serviced by largely abandoned French-built roads were already available through the mountain passes at Nape (Keo Neua) and Mugia.² Rehabilitation of these disused roads was preferred in contrast to developing Ban Karai in the south where no motorable roads yet existed.

During 1961 and 1962, under questionable bilateral aid agreements that Souvanna Phouma concluded with communist nations during the period of dual Lao governments, improvements were begun to roads and passes by the formidable 559th Transportation Unit. Located at a point only seventy five miles from the South Vietnamese border, emphasis was focused on improving Mugia Pass, where the French engineered Route-15 approached from the east. The road rose steeply on the east side, crossed the divide at

² Also called Mu Gia. Mugia will be used.

1,400-feet, and sloped gently into Laos. With eighty inches of annual rainfall, area rain forest gave way to piney forest above 2,500-feet. In a monumental effort, Route-15 was eventually raised and hard topped. Trucks and then trains shuttled supplies to the border, where Binh Tram One personnel unloaded and repacked items for porters and even elephants to transport supplies further south.

Before the war began in earnest, rudimentary Route-12 linked Mugia on the Lao side. Responding to early air interdiction in 1964, engineers constructed a bypass road. In time, another bypass with feeder routes was built to bypass bomb craters.

With abundant caves available to store supplies, and an airstrip to provide airlift capability, the Tchepone area afforded an excellent hub and marshalling area for the trail system. Therefore, with few government troops present to secure the area, (Savannakhet only had four BVs) Vietnamese forces ejected the 33rd RLA Volunteer Battalion from Tchepone during May 1961. They withdrew to the Ban Houei Sane garrison on the border, where they continued to function to some degree, and were supplied by Air America airdrops. ³ Like at Attopeu located in southern Military Region Four, Moug Heim in Military Region Two, and other similar areas in Laos, in order to survive, troops and officers at Houei Sane formed an unwritten accommodation with the enemy, which allowed the Vietnamese carte blanche to continue movement and trail work. Consequently, engineers methodically punched through almost impenetrable rain forest that incorporated triple canopy jungle, impossible to see through from the air.

³ This was the same Ban Houei Sane where Cheney and crew were shot down in September 1963, while conducting a drop mission to the site.

As an early example of the degree of difficulty involved in movement along the trails, by December, a small Vietnamese unit was trucked to Mugia Pass. Disembarking, sometimes breaking new ground, they walked south along the high narrow footpaths. Forced to forage along the way, it required a year to reach their destination.

By 1962, the trail was easier to negotiate. In 1964 further improvements enabled bicycle movement along the still narrow track.

With early reports of Vietnamese infiltration into and through Laos to South Vietnam arriving at USG intelligence centers, attempts were made to gather hard evidence and form a cohesive picture of the threat. By June 1961 and into 1963, active intelligence teams were clandestinely jumping into the area. In the fall of 1961, reports from these teams and other ground observation sources indicated that enemy movement into and through the country was increasing, with Tchepone deemed a major Vietnamese base. There was evidence of the 304th and 24th Divisions in the Route-9, Tchepone area. The 325th Division was located above the demilitarized zone (DMZ). Other intelligence reports from Military Region Four placed six Vietnamese battalions in the Bolovens area. There was additional observation of enemy troops close to Tchepone by White Star personnel and their scouts when the Geneva Accords were signed in July 1962. ⁴

⁴ Segment sources:

Douglas Pike, *People's Army of Vietnam* (California: Presido Press, 1986).

Vongsavanh, *CHECO: Royal Lao Government Military Operations and Activites in the Laotian Panhandle* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1981).

John Prados, *The Blood Road* (New York: Wiley & Sons, 1999).

Throughout the latter months of 1964, the air war in Southeast Asia rapidly evolved. Reacting solely to increased enemy incidents in the Theater and the continued bolstering of their southern Viet Cong forces, the Johnson Administration developed a limited and gradual air escalation along the logistical corridors leading to South Vietnam.

Late in November, the commander of U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (COMUSMACV) was plagued by intelligence that revealed the Vietnamese military was moving increasing numbers of men and supplies into South Vietnam along Lao trails. Although contingency plans to thwart such movement had been in place to deal with the issue for some time, the Chief Executive and his advisors chose the political policy to place U.S. bombing on the back burner until after the Presidential elections.

After LBJ retained the White House, Ambassador Maxwell Taylor advised Washington superiors that the continuing political and military quagmire in South Vietnam required additional action and a show of force against the enemy. He outlined several military options, which included covert and anti-infiltration operations in North Vietnam, reprisal bombing, and increased USG participation in Laos. During a National Security Council meeting, he discussed a more detailed two-phased program beginning with a measured thirty-day U.S. bombing campaign against Panhandle targets. Then, should Vietnamese leaders fail to heed the warning and cease supplying Viet Cong communists in South Vietnam, the program would be accelerated with coordinated strikes on southern North Vietnam over several

months. Like Yankee Team missions, the operation would be tightly controlled from Washington.

Feeling politically secure following the election, the Administration, backed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, made a final decision to approve the first phase of a controlled bombing campaign in early December. Marking escalation, and intended as a solid warning to Hanoi leaders of USG military power, the program was tailored to pressure the communists into reducing or stopping infiltration to the South. Code named Barrel Roll and using RLAF T-28s and U.S. "armed" reconnaissance jets, the plan included official U.S. strikes on the trails and enemy facilities every three days using four American fighter bombers. Designed to harass and interdict Pathet Lao and Vietnamese Army forces in Laos, the operation required deploying 150 additional aircraft to Southeast Asia.

While both men attended a United Nations General Assembly meeting in New York City, Dean Rusk and General Phoumi Nosavan discussed the Lao situation. Phoumi was enthusiastic about the increased use of RLAF T-28s and believed they had won the day during the present conflict. Always aggressive, he indicated that the Pathet Lao did not intend to adhere to the Geneva Accords, and Lao public opinion would not condone government inaction. He added that peace in Laos would no longer depend on the good will of Peiping, Hanoi, and Pathet Lao leaders.

Noting Vietnamese violations and the use of Laos to infiltrate troops to South Vietnam, Rusk concurred that compliance with the 1962 Accords was essential, that Vietnamese and Chinese leaders considered South Vietnam the primary target, and that enemy success there would jeopardize Laos. Without divulging details of the impending Barrel Roll campaign, the Secretary indicated USG had been and would be sending additional

signals to Hanoi civilian and military leaders to discourage present activities in Laos.

During the multi-day meeting, during "cloak room meetings" Rusk talked to USSR envoy Andre Gromyko. He complained that the North Vietnamese leadership was not honoring the Lao 1962 Geneva Accords. Intelligence revealed that thousands of Vietnamese troops had entered Lao territory in the past months, and the roads from Hanoi were congested with men and supplies en route to South Vietnam. Furthermore, for two years, except for occasional visits to Khang Khai, ICC representatives were denied access into areas controlled by Pathet Lao and Vietnamese to investigate alleged violations.

Although stating that Soviet Union leaders were not pleased with the current Lao situation, Gromyko casually brushed Rusk's complaints aside, adding that no one to date had been able to produce hard evidence of a North Vietnamese presence in the country.

By the seventh, the thirty day Barrel Roll plans, tailored to employ armed reconnaissance and strikes in the Panhandle area and along infiltrations routes, were far enough along in development to seek RLG approval. The following day Ambassador Sullivan received a joint Defense-State message charging him to inform Souvanna Phouma of the plan and gain his concurrence. Bombings would not be publicized except as specified by the RLG. Lao military operations would be increased, particularly in the infiltration areas, and close to the border. U.S. air cover and flak suppression missions would support this action. Strikes would commence against the trails first, and later against Route-7 and additional infiltration routes.

After meeting privately with the Prime Minister on Thursday, Ambassador Sullivan gained Souvanna's full support to commence operations. Phouma encouraged bombing targets on the

infiltration routes day or night, but insisted the strikes not be publicized or acknowledged. In case of a downed plane, reports would be released that the plane was fulfilling escort or photo reconnaissance duty as requested by the RLG. He stressed emphasis on interdicting Routes-8, 12, and always his main concern, Route-7.

Following approval by the RLG, Secretary Robert McNamara authorized the first two missions. Finally, after coordination between CINCPAC, CINCPACAF, the Secretaries of State and Defense, the U.S. Ambassadors to Laos and Thailand, and General Moore, Commanding Officer of the 2nd Air Division, Saigon, the alert went out to U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force squadrons to prepare for armed reconnaissance and airstrikes on the Ho Chi Minh Trail complex.

The first mission commenced on 14 December. By then authority had been obtained from the Thai government to use Thai-based USAF aircraft in support of RLAFF T-28 mission strikes on the logistics corridor. It is interesting to note that these missions coincided with the U.S. portion of Barrel Roll. Four USAF Danang-based F-105s, supported by nine other planes providing escort, MiGCAP, refueling, and post-strike reconnaissance attacked a sunken Route-8 bridge and secondary targets near Nape Pass. While searching for targets of opportunity along Route-8 they encountered no enemy ground fire, and after action BDA revealed little actual damage.

U.S. Navy participation commenced on the 17th when planes from the USS *Ranger* attacked a bridge and area targets at the junction of Routes-8 and 12. When the jets departed, the bridge still stood, but several buildings were demolished.

While assuming the duty of American Ambassador to Laos for a short time, Bill Sullivan forwarded unkind words to military

leaders over the results of the two bombing missions.¹ He indicated that there had been an eight-hour delay informing AIRA Chief, Colonel Tyrell, of the first launch. Consequently, Air America UH-34D helicopters and crews could not be positioned for potential SARs, and there could have been conflicts with scheduled RLAF T-28 operations out of Savannakhet. He also questioned BDA evidence that might have included collateral damage on civilian structures. He requested agreement on verifiable military targets. CINCPAC agreed and directed, perhaps unrealistically, that future targets of opportunity be clearly identified as solely military.

After a meeting by a select committee specifically formed to monitor Barrel Roll progress and activity, Phase-1 operations continued throughout December. Supplemented by RLAF T-28s, the strikes concentrated on Panhandle targets along Routes-23, 9, 12, and 121.

As a sop to the Prime Minister's emphasis on Military Region Two interdiction, the first sortie along Route-7 was flown on 21 December. Four F-100s from Da Nang and two Korat-based MiGCAP F-105 pilots flew a west to east forty mile stretch between the Nong Pet road junction over the Ban Ban Valley to Nong Het, a major resupply and transshipment area. An Able Mable RF-101 pilot charged with conducting a bomb damage assessment accompanied them. No enemy traffic was discovered as vehicles were already rolling at night. However, AAA fire was received from the Ban Ken Bridge area. The bridge was not a target, but after the blatant aggression, bombs, rockets, and anti-personnel CBUs were salvoed at the sites. In the process, some of the planes were hit, but all RTB safely to their respective bases.

¹ At the time, William Sullivan had not visited Luang Prabang to present his credentials to the King.

Results of the three weeks work was not judged encouraging, as numerous restrictions prevailed to hamper more successful operations. Mainly, the small number of strike aircraft per mission was not allowed to fly the shorter distance from Thailand, employ napalm, overfly North Vietnam, a two mile buffer zone along the border, or attack a list of prohibited targets such as the Ban Ken bridge in the Ban Ban Valley. Moreover, the required seventy-two hours period between flights resulted in mission delays, and created scheduling problems. Despite these restrictions, aggressive and crusty Air Force Chief of Staff General Curtis Le May believed his people could produce results that were more satisfactory. Therefore, he informed Commanding Officer 2nd Air Division, General Moore, that he expected a great deal more out of his airmen on future missions.

Since there was no acknowledgement of the new bombing program from the North Vietnamese regime, early intelligence analysis speculated that principals in Hanoi could not discern any difference from the T-28 strikes and the 880 Yankee Team missions conducted since May. Consequently, the envisioned signal of the increasing potential of American airpower was not achieved.

In addition, photo intelligence during late 1964 and early 1965 revealed road improvements, bridge construction, and dust clouds, which indicated increased use of the trails.

Because the F-101 force was considered too large at the Tan Son Neut base and too distant from target areas, 13th Air Force leaders desired to move some planes closer to the action at either Don Muang or Udorn. After the Air Attaché in Bangkok presented reasons not to base aircraft at Don Muang, an inspection team was sent to Udorn to assess the facility. The

men discovered the runway too short, with no arresting barrier, and insufficient water to process photographs.

As the Lao conflict slowly evolved toward a heated air war, USG State Department and Rusk continued to talk to Soviet officials regarding a renewed Geneva Conference. Behind the scene, State encouraged Souvanna Phouma to insist on stringent preconditions leading to any conference. The super-power discussions went nowhere. They assumed the same heated accusations that the participants were not adhering to the Geneva Accords.

Barrel Roll--the campaign soon evolved into a more ambitious mission called **Rolling Thunder**--escalation continued north until just before administrations changed in 1968, and LBJ terminated the program.

Although we were not initially privy to aspects of the U.S. bombing campaign, the escalation had distinct implications for many of us in the helicopter program. Specifically, the following six months would mark a stressful period of extreme challenge and danger for me, so much that I harbored serious doubts regarding my mortality. ²

² Segment Sources:

CHECO; Van Staaveren, *Interdiction*, 44,46,47.
Memorandum of Conversation Dean Rusk & Phoumi, 12/03/64.
Memorandum of Conversation Rusk-Gromyko, 12/05/64.
Memorandum Rusk, McNamara, McCone to LBJ, 12/07/64.
State/Defense Message to Sullivan, 12/08/64.
Telegram William Sullivan to State, 12/10/64.
Edward Marolda.
Memorandum JCS to McNamara, 12/17/64, Foreign Relations, December.
Bill Leary Draft *SAR January 13 and 14, 1965*.
Victor Anthony, 146.
John Smith, *Rolling Thunder*, 41, 44.
Edward Greenhalgh, *Voodoo*, Chapter 3-*Reconnaissance Over the North*, 67.

Since summer, the Western presence had continued to expand in Udorn, fostering additional demands on the fragile local economy and infrastructure by those who consumed far more than the Thai. Without counting the influx of USAF personnel, additional pilots now entered our program daily, adding to the congestion, inflation, and confusion at a time when city utilities and public services were already stretched to the breaking point. The city fathers failed to foresee what would happen or the population explosion that was about to occur. Of course, for every foreigner who arrived, additional Thai, including many greedy and unsavory types, gravitated to the area to provide various services to the newcomers.

One problem was the lack of potable water. The reservoir across town, called Nong Prachak, was never intended to benefit a large population, particularly individuals like me who lived on the periphery of town. The lake depended solely on annual rainfall to replenish the water supply and last until the following rainy season. In former days, pending a normal monsoon season, there was generally sufficient water available for the entire dry season. Not now. One day, while I neared the end of the lengthy amoeba "cure," water ceased flowing through the pipes. This had often occurred before my area was incorporated into the city limits and the landlord had water pipes installed to the house. During those bad old days, I had water truck drivers deliver the liquid to the house from wherever they could find the precious commodity and fill the holding tanks. The process was cause for concern, as the driver invariably had

trouble negotiating the gate, which resulted in damage to the green plastic Sopa Villa sign.

I never knew the source of water used. However, I heard rumors indicating that water was sucked from filthy klongs, stagnant pools, or whatever supply was available--the later in a dry season, the nastier the water. To minimize contamination, I added a gallon of Clorox to the lower water tank. This probably did not completely address the problem, but provided me with some peace of mind.

It appeared that rather than progressing, we were actually regressing, and I was tired of trying to obtain water on a daily basis. Then, partially explaining the disruption in the water supply, I heard that new water mains were being laid.

Over time, invisible fungus organisms in the polluted water produced depigmentation to various parts of our skin.¹ Unsightly, but not detrimental to our health, others contracted worse cases. Charlie Weitz had a large patch of white develop on his upper torso. However, no one displayed the results of the water borne fungus as much as Billy Palmer. A large white patch on his left shoulder contrasted with his jet black skin. It reminded me of the dead white scarring of Negro skin after first and second degree burns healed. Bill was a little sensitive about the condition, but being the good person he was, accepted kidding directed his way, "*There is fungus among us.*"

Because we heated drinking water at least three or more minutes to a rolling boil, no one suffered permanent sickness from the nasty liquid. Most of the time, as it was treated at the Air America facility water plant and deemed potable, I filled my five-gallon plastic container at the water tap in

¹ The Author's lower legs are still covered with unattractive white spots.

front of Ben Moore's office for upcountry and home consumption. One time, when the man-made lake southwest of the facility was low and water critical at the base, Ben, still captain of the bridge, questioned me about drawing from the supply. Because I was going upcountry, I took exception to Ben's inquisition and politely told him so. I felt he should be happy we were taking health precautions, which would spare the Company loss of our services. I think he got the message, for he grumped a little and went back up on his porch perch.

AFRICA

There was a lot of discussion in our group about the deteriorating situation in the independent Republic of Congo, formerly the Belgian Congo prior to June 1960. Unprepared for independence, despite the presence of United Nations peacekeepers, a quasi-civil war between politicians, warlords, and tribal leaders waxed and waned throughout the country.

During May 1964, the CIA began operations to support the "legal" government and army with a clandestine air force. Employing front organizations, the Agency hired ground maintenance personnel and Cuban exiles to fly the planes. To conceal USG complicity, American representatives claimed the Cubans were hired directly by the Leopoldville government. Further enhancing the air combat arm, Ed Dearborn, our Company tough-man, and Don Coney disappeared from the contingent of fixed wing Vientiane pilots to operate T-28s in support of the Congolese government.

Similar to Alpha pilots flying T-28 missions in Laos, the two were purportedly USG deniable mercenaries hired by the existing government. Revelation of American civilians flying combat missions was eventually exposed to the world by the media. Consequently, an embarrassed U.S. State Department

indicated that the men would cease combat flying and return to Leopoldville where they would only train Cuban replacement pilots. Later, when Dearborn and Coney returned from Africa, vivid stories circulated about their support of General Joseph Mobutu's army, strafing columns of rebel refugees and troops in northern Katanga province and the Kivu region.

During August, anti-government Simba rebels stormed Stanleyville, held hundreds of Europeans hostage (including five Americans) and were threatening to execute them if the government attempted to oppose their movement. To counter Chinese communist influence in the area, we were happy that LBJ stepped up help in the form of a "rescue" mission to the area, but hoped the U.S. would not become too involved, as everyone expected the "balloon" to go up soon in our Theater, which would require critical assets in Southeast Asia.

Calculated to retake Stanleyville, a mixed Agency, U.S. Army, and Belgian Army operation commenced in November. It was a success, but at the cost of innocents. The war continued until officially declared over in March 1965. ²

Since I abstained from consuming alcohol while "taking the cure," my social life suffered a bit in the bar scene. However, after feeling better, I did go to the airfield compound periodically to collect my mail and eat. On the first, I saw Jim MacFarlane in the Club and presented him with a hundred dollar check written to Bird and Son for our chow fund obligation. Although Jim worked for Bird, he lived in Udorn with his family. Collecting for the food fund continued catch-as-catch can between Udorn and Long Tieng. Cash flow was generally enough to

² Odom, *Dragon Operations: Hostage Rescues in the Congo 1964-1965*, Combat Studies Institute, Leavenworth Papers #14 (Washington: USG Printing Office, 1991.).
Time Magazine, Is Anyone in Control?, 06/26/64 (Time.com).

cover our obligations and provide a small surplus. Over the next three days, I collected money from Steve Stevens, Art White, and Lou McCasland. Tony Poe was in the area on a rare trip south, so I gave him one hundred baht for the houseboy, and in return, he handed me forty dollars to cover four-months.

THE EXPERIMENT

To more adequately crew our equipment, reduce increasing flight time, and fulfill dual piloted SOP requirements for SAR duty, additional helicopter pilots were hired in December. Local management's wish list provided to the Washington hiring team stressed a preference for USMC types, having at least 1,500 total hours. The first three men hired were old breed Marines. Because of the increased use of Bell-manufactured model 204 turbine engine "Huey" helicopters for the Army and CH-46Es in the Marine Corps, the Company discovered a decreased number of H-34 throttle twisters available for hire. Therefore, Washington and Taipei management opted to employ a few recently retired World War Two Marine Corps officers. Perhaps if they had a preference, the men would have elected to fly fixed wing aircraft, but current Company needs centered on only employing pilots with H-34 experience. Since the old timers were fifteen to nineteen years our senior, the seemingly new policy may have also been an experiment to achieve increased stability by introducing a modicum of maturity into our program.

Older pilots were not wanting in the Air America-Civil Air Transport system. Many were PICs in the larger fixed wing aircraft programs. However, what Washington failed to understand, performing more exacting helicopter work that required a pilot to bounce around hilltops several times a day was different and far more strenuous than flying planes from point to point or air dropping supplies. We believed that H-34

work, especially in Laos, was tailored for young men. Flying ten hours a day, while enduring vibration levels that were particularly irksome because of unbalanced blades, or an inadequate parts supply was taxing even on a younger man's body. How would an older man absorb such punishment? Although accumulating years of fixed wing and helicopter experience, could the oldsters earn their bones in the mountains through OJT as we had? Would they learn enough from their mistakes to survive? What about senior citizen impaired reflexes and reaction times that could normally only be judged under fire?

Considering these hard questions, it was not difficult to wax skeptical about Company policy, for it was not the first time an older type had been hired to fly H-34s. A former Marine Corps colonel had arrived in the fall and was escorted around our facility. Used to more comfortable surroundings, and not liking what he observed, he promptly departed Udorn. It was too bad, for he was not afforded an opportunity to observe and compare the new with the old facility, sans Club and swimming pool.

Hired in early December, but arriving in Udorn sometime after the check-in, interview, and familiarization period in Taipei, Zim J Radalinski (12/01/64), Ed Moreland (12/03/64), and Charlie Jones joined our growing pilot force.³ The only one of the three I knew well was Charlie Jones. The large man had been the Officer in Charge (OIC) of our HMR-261 Maintenance Department, when the squadron was formed at New River in mid-1960. As Flight Equipment Officer and a subpart of maintenance, I technically, but never directly worked under him. I only flew with Charlie five times during my squadron tenure, but noting he

³ Date of hire (DOH) was predicated on the time an employee reached the Taipei, Taiwan headquarters.

was a decent H-34 pilot and a friendly individual like the Skipper, I enjoyed every airborne minute with him. I could not say that about other HMM-261 majors not as proficient in an H-34, who were merely marking time until retirement. Charlie was a kick. One night, while drilling around the dark sky obtaining night flying proficiency, he told me a story about how he had once landed next to his house and shut down for coffee. After mulling this over, to my relief, he rejected the idea. As he had a twinkle in his eye, I never ascertained if he was truly serious.

During Friday night happy hours at the New River Officer Club, Charlie was very affable and an interesting conversationalist. He regaled us youngsters with "war stories" regarding his World War Two and Korean War experiences. In fact, the squadron was top heavy with old dogs who loved to drink, and the lengthy sessions were exceptionally well patronized. With no experience to draw upon, we young pups readily absorbed the stories, idolized our heroes, and hoped for our chance in combat.

Although I suspected he could spin a yarn to its outer limits, Charlie was not a blustery phony individual. He was a bona fide combat ace, having amassed six confirmed kills while flying fighter planes in the Pacific Theater. Sometimes, when in his cups, he was a bit contrite, saying he could see the Japanese pilots' faces and eyes in the cockpits just before shooting them out of the sky. Flying mostly junk planes, Charlie noted that some of the aviators were no more than children, relatively easy to splash. Flying the superior gull wing Corsair, much of his later World War Two action was performed at night in support and defense of the Okinawa campaign when waves of Kamikaze planes threatened U.S. ships lying off the island.

Charlie had obtained his helicopter experience in Korea flying the underpowered Sikorsky HRS. Mostly used at the time for medevac, he related that one day he had trouble landing because of prevailing fog. Consequently, he had to hover down a flagpole to land at the base. That story sounded a little farfetched, but I was not there to witness the deed.

After our squadron dissolved in July 1961 and reformed on Okinawa, Charlie became our squadron Executive Officer. He held this position until HMM-261 rotated to the States in mid-1962.

Lacking an all-important college degree, unless an individual was outstanding and a superb politician like my former Skipper, there was little chance of advancement above major in the Marine Corps promotion system. Therefore, retiring at the rank of major, Charlie calculated that flying a couple years for Air America would afford an excellent supplement to his military pension.

The new men began filtering in by mid-month. Of the three, Charlie was probably best accepted. Despite his dissipated looking exterior, with his good humor and colorful stories, Charlie became an instant success with the nightly bar crowd. After a short stint at one of the downtown hotels, someone offered him my house as transient quarters until he found other accommodations. I was still living alone and preferred it that way, but having plenty of room, readily agreed to the proposal. Charlie remained only a short time until renting a place with "Rad" Radalinski, whom he knew well and was more attuned to his age group.

Since the Company no longer paid for the red lined great coats manufactured locally in Udorn when I joined the operation, and as Charlie had no cold weather gear, I gave him my coat. It was no great loss, for I no longer used it. Except for the first few Sam Tong RONS, along with all the gear I carried, I

considered the coat too heavy and bulky to lug upcountry. It was only bitterly cold at night during December and January, and we normally were in our sleeping bags early. Mornings were frosty until about 0900 hours, but a sweatshirt, a gray "Ike" jacket, and the sun's rays radiating through the sky-lighted cockpit provided sufficient warmth to my body.

Wayne expended a considerable amount of time training the three men over the next two to three months. Lou McCasland first flew a one-hour test flight with Jones on the 19th. He also flew with "Rad" the same day. They ferried Lao helicopter 1332 from Paksane to Udorn, after which they tested the machine and flew an hour at night. Over time, Wayne considered Jones and Moreland fine pilots, but Radalinski had serious problems controlling the H-34. Later, in 1965 following a line check in the Lunag Prabang area, Wayne washed him out of the program. After apprising him of his deficiencies and termination, "Rad" was reduced to tears. However, with Porter Hough leading the way into a fixed wing slot, Taipei arranged to have Radolinski follow him to a First Officer's position at Vientiane. ⁴

I completed the amoeba cure, and as the dismal side effects of the medicine diminished, I actually felt much better. To ensure that my system was cleared of active parasites and spores, I planned a January STO and a trip to the Bangkok Christian Hospital for reexamination.

Missing combat flying while grounded, particularly the Military Region Three SARs, was bitter sweet. On one hand I enjoyed the rest and relaxation from the stress and strain of the "shot pattern." On the other hand, I found it very difficult to sit out the recent involvement in Military Region Three, and

⁴ EW Knight Email, 07/06/00.
Lou McCasland December 1964 Flight Time Records.

receive only second hand information. Therefore, without reservation, I was ready to reenter the "Land of Oz."

Because the medically enforced downtime during November had placed me somewhat behind my peers for monthly and overall yearly flight time, the CPH office informed me to prepare for an extended RON. Since the Company vision was to restrict pilots, when possible, to one hundred hours per month for crew safety, there was only so much the Operations Department could do to boost flight time to that magic number.

On 9 December, accompanied by new Flight Mechanic, Rudy Serafico, I piloted Hotel-24 to Long Tieng. Lately, with the addition of H-34s to our inventory, the necessity for crews to deadhead upcountry had lessened. However, this often-tedious chore was superseded by continuing maintenance problems fostered by too few parts and too many aircraft for complete attention by a short-handed Maintenance Department. Many helicopters exiting the hangar for test flights were improperly tracked, or possessed worn bearings, which resulted in excessive vibrations. This was in addition to a confusing mix of engine problems that we had experienced beginning in the fall. A lot of blame could be attributed to pilots who, anxious to fly and make money, refused to write up suspected, impending, or current maintenance problems. In all fairness, vibrations and oscillations were subjective and did not equally affect every pilot in the same manner. Others without much H-34 time or test pilot experience had few clues about judging excessive vibrations from normal levels. Differing individual tolerances presented a losing battle in keeping the machines up to snuff. As a result of the problems, there were more than a few heated words exchanged between pilots and mechanics. John Aspinwall attempted to perform the best he could with the limited resources provided.

During our conversations, he tried to maintain composure, but I could see the strain beginning to tell on the tall former Navy chief's face.

The first day's work upcountry demonstrated to me just how much territory we had recovered and were still recouping since Operation Triangle. Without incident, or fear of being hit by groundfire, I easily flew from Udorn to Long Tieng to Paksane, to Moung Soui and back to The Alternate to RON. Covering hundreds of miles in a day, our field of action was considerable, and only fueling logistics could hamper operations. It was a little early to judge the overall Military Region Two situation, but perhaps air strikes had sufficiently disrupted enemy supply lines along Route-7, delaying or curtailing major offenses. Yet, we were realistically aware that it was only a matter of time before superior enemy forces would come surging back.

While working at Moung Soui, a RO representative informed me that Phou Khout had been bombed by T-28s on the first, in preparation for yet another FAN ground offensive. By the third, five fresh battalions launched an assault on the area. Supported by diversionary Meo shelling, and harassment actions on enemy positions six to twelve miles northeast and south of Phou Khout, FAN units reputedly captured primary objectives around a portion of Phou Khout's base. With no indirect fire to concern friendly forces, opposition had been light, but complete encirclement was still in progress. Two days later, encountering little resistance or artillery, the attack progressed somewhat on schedule with one friendly unit, and enemy companies were eliminated or forced out of the area.

Within the past two weeks, FAR in the Tha Thom and Tha Vieng areas were strengthened by one battery of 105mm howitzers

and two battalions from GM-14. ¹

TERRY BURKE'S REASSIGNMENT

Terry Burke departed Long Tieng while I was taking the amoeba cure. Since Vint Lawrence returned from his bout of hepatitis, he and Terry had encountered philosophical differences regarding the war's conduct. Vint was decidedly interested in building the economy and political stature of the Meo people. In contrast, Terry was far more interested in direct and aggressive military action, rather than helping with community development. This was reinforced when he observed Touby Ly Fong carrying opium to Vientiane in his suitcase on our aircraft. Burke was particularly concerned that the Meo, with an ever-increasing number of fixed positions, were moving toward a set-piece war rather than a highly successful guerrilla war. Therefore, he continued to recommend and plan guerrilla type incursions against enemy lines of communication (LOC). This was not their only bone of contention. Adding to the strained relations, one day Vint severely reproached Terry for participating in SAR and offensive type missions, mainly dropping rocks and grenades on enemy truck convoys with Lloyd Zimmerman.

AB-1 honchos Bill Lair and Pat Landry again became interested in reinstating and organizing tribal operations in Sayaboury Province. Enlisting the aid of a PARU team, Case Officer Bill Young had begun this project in 1961. With enemy units pouring across the border into Laos in Sam Neua, Lair recalled his original promise to Vang Pao about providing a fall back area in Sayaboury should the Meo project come under extreme pressure or fail. Learning about the AB-1 requirement, Terry

¹ Vientiane Embassy to State (Swank), 12/01, 03, 05/64.
Leonard Unger to State, 11/25/64.

requested the job. Starting almost from scratch, it would constitute a daunting challenge, but provide relief from Vint's invective.

During the cold season, Terry was reassigned to Sayaboury Province to work with the first Thai Army Special Forces team sent into Laos, who were tasked to build up Meo ADC in the region. Their overall mission was to cope with and eliminate the few rag-tag Pathet Lao elements raiding Meo and Lao Theung villages.

They first selected the mountain village of Phia Chia (later listed LS-155) for a Meo training base. A short airstrip was constructed, hooches erected, and defensive positions built to ward off enemy attack. The next task involved recruiting, outfitting, and arming Meo, who were not the equivalent of VP's warriors.

After a time, Terry did not believe he was receiving the proper air support required to supply local outposts. Therefore, he sent message after message to Long Tieng requesting Tony or Vint to send an aircraft. Finally, Helio Courier pilot, Paul Severson, arrived in the valley with a note from Poe. It read, "*When are you going to begin killing someone?*" Attached were a pair of dried ears from his collection. Terry, responding in like fashion, purchased a large water buffalo allocated for the December Meo New Year celebration. After the locals slaughtered the beast, Burke had them sever the penis and testicles. He secured the large organs in a plastic bag and sent them to Long Tieng with a note stating, "*We are fighting real men over here!*" Needless to say, Tony thoroughly enjoyed the joke.

For the rest of the year, and into early 1965, contact with the Pathet Lao was sporadic, resistance light, and missions were largely successful. Pathet Lao soldiers generally abandoned villages when pressured. A problem evolved when friendly

soldiers proved reluctant to relocate or fight any distance from their homes, which forced Terry's people to recruit and train fresh Meo and Lao Theung.

During the period, one hundred new men were recruited and an airdrop of standard issue of weapons, uniforms, and sneakers was requested from headquarters. Committing a navigation error, the delivery crew dropped the load into a KMT village. At the time, there was little contact between the tribals and the Chinese. Burke reluctantly went to the village, explained the situation to the chief, and requested that the contents of the errant drop be returned. He hinted that bad things might occur if they did not comply, and eventually received all the equipment except the highly prized sneakers.

Finally, it was decided to move the successful operation out of the mountains to the flat lands of Xieng Lom. ²

At our nightly sessions in the Twenty Alternate administration "hooch," which included the day's events and plans, Tony gushed about an over-the-counter stock his broker had just recommended. Its name was Christiana Securities, a holding company for DuPont Chemical Company and other such companies. Selling at 230 dollars per share, the stock appeared expensive, but had attained a high of 5,000 dollars in the past. A good dividend and frequent stock splits were considered attractive reasons to purchase the stock. As Tony was the stock market guru of the mountains, and I was always looking for the

² Terry Burke, *Early Days Draft*.
Terry Burke Email, 03/01/04, 11/07/07.
Bill Leary 1964 Notes, UTD.

twenty year winner, in my next letter, I decided to ask Dad to research it. ³

Tending to prevent boredom, daily random selection dictated working in different areas in Military Region Two. Therefore, on Thursday, Rudy and I flew an eleven-hour day conducting shuttles to the east and various other sites supporting Vang Pao's late year efforts.

During the afternoon, we went to Houa Moung, where activity was on the increase along with emphasis to develop new sites and consolidate old ones. Although I did not possess knowledge of any air strikes or reconnaissance missions, our presence may have been required to cover some late activity. Of late, fuel was stored in abundant supply to satisfy SAR SOPs.

FUTURE PLANS

Apparently, the year's military successes fostered additional spending for long-term air delivery projects. In addition to upgrading and repairing major airfields throughout Laos as necessary, stimulated by Air America requests, current USAID plans existed to lengthen and improve the Long Tieng runway to accommodate larger aircraft. This would provide a more efficient and less costly method of delivering fuel drums and supplies to the site. It would also eliminate continuation of the many previously damaged or lost supplies during airdrops. Because of the incline at the south gap that necessitated a hairy flare to touchdown and a subterranean river crossing half way up the strip, runway alignment would be altered slightly and the entire strip shifted northwest upslope toward the karsts.

³ Had we the money and intestinal fortitude to purchase the occasional stock Tony advised, we might have attained our goals early, and become wealthy men.

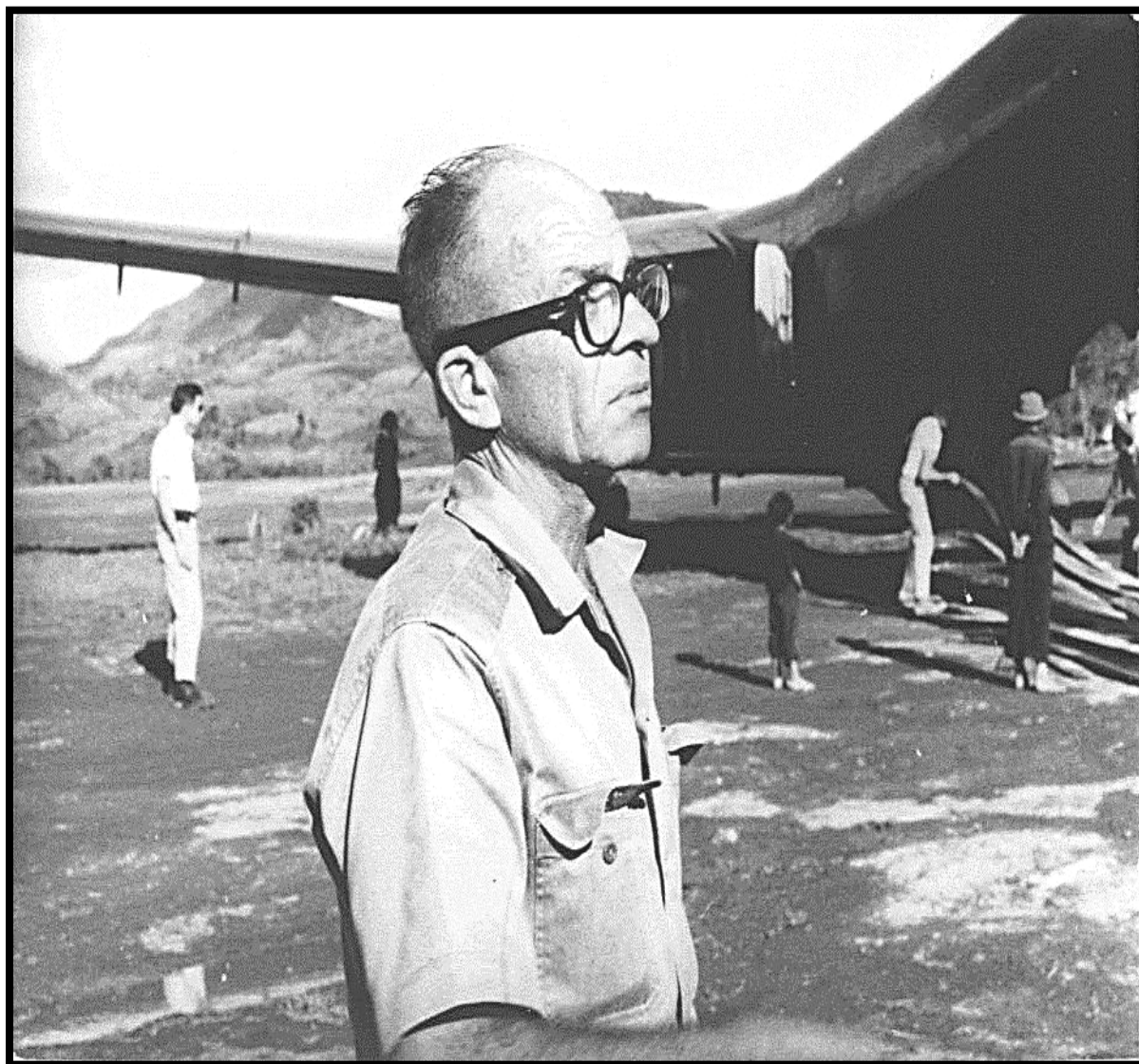
There was even a greater emphasis placed on immediately developing the Sam Tong refugee center, under the aegis of engineer Tom Cole, to accommodate the increasing number of RONing flight crews. Plans were on the drawing board for a Company hostel and other supporting buildings. A viable water system and power plant were planned. Rolling stock would include portable fuel tankers to provide rapid hot refueling. ⁴

The concept sounded wonderful. Hot meals, showers, and real beds would certainly improve our health and standard of living. For the first time, Captains would enjoy individual rooms like the Company personnel manual dictated. However, in a world where promises were akin to "castles in the air" and action proved more reliable than words, we were a little skeptical. We also knew that RONing at Sam Tong would deny us rapport with the Customer, something we so greatly treasured. I could imagine Pop's thoughts on the subject and his cursing about USAID bringing **his** fiefdom into the twentieth century.

WARD'S INPUT

Pop Buell's able USAID assistant Tom Ward wrote a comprehensive article, *U.S. Aid to Hill Tribe Refugees in Laos*, which adequately described a requirement for increased refugee relief infrastructure in the country, largely because of the successful enemy 1964 spring offensive. With Sam Tong the hub of refugee processing and activity in Military Region Two, it was natural that continued development and provisions for additional air assets first expanded there. Although the article dealt almost exclusively with USG's USAID participation in the war,

⁴ Dave Hickler Memorandum to Airport Engineer (GML), Work to be Done, 12/11/64.



Chief USAID representative in Military Region Two, Pop Buell observing offloading of lumber from a C-7 Caribou for Sam Tong, Laos, projects.
LaDue Collection.

and not in the more sensitive U.S. military and Agency aspects, it was informative and enlightening.

Tom began his year-end report tailored for his superiors in the present tense. In a paraphrased format and additions introduced by the Author, he stated in part:

"The widespread refugee problem is caused by the protracted warfare being waged by the Pathet Lao with support from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Much of Xieng Khouang, Sam Neua [Houa Phan in MR-2], Nam Tha [Houa Khong in MR-1] provinces has been occupied by enemy forces, and thousands of mountain tribals have been displaced from their homes and rice fields. As a humanitarian gesture, and in response to Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma's request, USAID has undertaken an emergency assistance program in cooperation with the RLG Ministry of Social Welfare.

By the end of 1964, more than 150,000 refugees received American assistance in the form of rice, clothing, blankets, cooking-pots, tools, and seed. Ninety percent of the supplies, amounting to 50 tons per day, were delivered by airdrop to primary locations by Air America and Bird and Son planes. Helicopters and smaller fixe wing planes distributed additional supplies to sites.

Of the estimated 141,500 refugees in the north, there were 88,000 Meo tribesmen located in Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua provinces. Large numbers of Lao Theung refugees ranging to 26,500 exist in the Northern provinces. Ethnic Lao refugees are estimated to live mostly in Sam Neua. In MR-1's Nam Tha province, 6,000 Yao, 2,000 Lue, and small numbers of various other tribes are refugees. Additional refugees within the country have relocated to the Vientiane area, or closer to the Mekong in MR-3 and 4.

As a consequence of the 1964 enemy offensive, an additional 30,000 refugees were created. This offset an identical number

deemed self-sufficient because of good harvest conditions within friendly controlled areas. The new refugees were expected to require support until the late fall of 1965 until the new rice crop materialized.

In locations close to contested areas, dependence on USAID relief is greater than in relatively secure areas around Sam Tong and Long Tieng. The current task of the relief program has been to provide a living subsistence to those people. USAID's goal is to permanently settle noncombatants in secure, rich agriculture areas suitable to the tribals' way of life. Since the military situation in the border areas is still fluid, resettlement there is not believed viable."

Tom's excellent article failed to address the benefit that high and lowland people remaining in place provided to both friendly and enemy factions. As a devastating enemy "scorched earth policy" was still years away from implementation, locals provided food and slave labor to communist units garrisoning or moving through an area. Therefore, to deny the Pathet Lao these benefits, in many cases, it benefited Vang Pao to remove such people from an area. On the government side, friendly residents provided intelligence, recruitment potential, and forward springboards in denied territory to further encroach into enemy domains.

"The greatest refugee number is found in Xieng Khouang Province among the Meo clans. Meo guerrillas have proven effective fighters on both sides. In the mountains, they are superior to lowland troops. A majority has remained loyal to the central Vientiane government, courtesy of USG programs, and CIA sponsored warlord, General Vang Pao. The Refugee Relief Program has provided, for the first time ever, a means for the RLG to become involved with the tribal people. Previously reluctant to address their needs, the RLG is now able to assess their

requirements and offer help and services to the refugees. However, the program was still deemed limited. More direct government involvement with villagers was needed for the RLG to spread the evolving image of its goals for the country.

Sam Tong, located in a high mountain valley south of the Plain of Jars, is the center of refugee activities in Xieng Khouang Province. Half the province, mostly the lower territory, the PDJ, the old provincial capital at Xieng Khouang Ville, and Route-7 connecting the Plain of Jars with North Vietnam is under Pathet Lao control. Relief commodities are delivered to Sam Tong mostly by Caribou aircraft and shuttled to refugee sites by smaller aircraft, usually the workhorse Helio Courier.

Pop Buell is the chief USAID representative at Sam Tong. His overwhelming success with the people developed from his empathy and undiminished energy in dealing with the people. An agricultural background and some language capacity have advanced his understanding of local problems. Pop's regular visits to area villages have gained tribal and government admiration for the man.

A typical USAID reaction in MR-2 commences when reports of new refugees are received at Sam Tong. Then Buell, Tom Ward, or Blaine Jensen along with Thongsar Boupaha and/or a village leader visit the displaced people at the location they walked or been airlifted. Safe relocation sites are discussed with the elders and the headman. A list of family members and total numbers is created. The individuals are informed they will receive rice only until they are able to harvest their own supply. Against this end, large bags of seed rice are provided. Since the people usually arrive carrying few provisions, blankets, cooking pots, bolts of black cloth, and basic tools are issued. Steel bars are provided for the talented village blacksmith to manufacture required tools. Emphasis is placed on education, so the people

*are encouraged to erect a school. Further enhancing village infrastructure, a Meo medic visits the new location to supervise construction of a dispensary. An intelligent youngster is selected for medic training at Sam Tong, where the USAID Public Health Department under the competent leadership of Doctor Charles Weldon and his wife Patricia, monitor the operation of an 80-bed hospital. Facility equipment is provided by the Colombo Plan and USAID. A majority of patients are casualties of war, malaria, malnutrition and various indigenous diseases."*⁵

I knew it was only a matter of time until I would experience what many other pilots had already faced. By the third day of my RON, it occurred. After return from an eastern shuttle, while waiting my turn at the side of the Long Tieng runway to load for another trip, the engine coughed at idle and began running rough. Unlike Howard Estes and others who experienced this condition while airborne, I breathed a sigh of relief and considered myself extremely fortunate to be planted on terra firma. Since similar engine problems had cropped up all fall, I assumed that we were out of business. While I considered the downtime involved, Rudy hopped out of the cabin section, opened the clamshell doors, and began tinkering with the carburetor. Within a short time, coordinating with me and enriching the mixture, he had the engine running smoothly and we continued to march. I was proud of Serafico. An older Filipino Flight Mechanic never would have attempted to correct such a condition. Without his experience or initiative to act, we would have been grounded. My estimation of the young man rose appreciably. Although Rudy's "field expediency" appeared to solve an immediate problem, the underlying cause of the

⁵ Kunstadter, *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, and Nations*: Tom Ward, *U.S. Aid to Hill Tribe Refugees in Laos*, Chapter 8, 265-303.

malfunction was not resolved, nor was it readily apparent. The unexplainable issue led to a general distrust of a beloved and previously believed reliable engine, capable of performing the job without undue worry to the crew. Along with normal work and stress of potential SARs, this problem was yet another factor to consider while airborne.

By December, when Tha Thom was believed secure, small amounts of drummed fuel were flown in and stored alongside the grass strip. This eliminated wasted ferry time returning to The Alternate for juice. Working in and around the valley, helping to consolidate positions and expansion of friendly territory was easy, as even in the hills elevations were low. The only downside to working at L-11 was the extreme heat and humidity that sapped one's energy. However, FAR personnel were accommodating and passed an occasional refreshing coconut into the cockpit. Filled with the energy charging liquid, the coconuts kept me going.

MARRIAGE FEAST

That evening, as we were about to suck down a beer in the PARU hooch prior to supper, a large frame surged into the room. Tony entered and briskly shouted to Ed Reid and me, *"Let's go! We are all invited to a Meo wedding dinner, and it is already late."* Like a superior officer in the Corps, Tony's suggestion was tantamount to an order, so we traipsed across the runway to the location, where the party was just beginning. Since intermittent rain had fallen that day, a parachute tent fly was erected over the guests. After paying our respects to the young couple, we took positions at a long table. Young Meo girls (at least they looked like girls), dressed in their finest black embroidered attire, and silver necklaces generally reserved for the New Year, alternated between the males. Smiling was about

all the communication I could muster at the time. Ed, knowing a little Lao from his liaison with Chai, did much better in the charm department. As was my custom, I opted to drink a couple of beers, while Ed chose the stronger native lao-lao to acknowledge toasts and quaff after speeches. Aware of what that strong booze could do to a person (as in Pop's homespun jargon, "*It chaps my lips*"), I cringed as I saw him casually tossing down numerous shots of the potent mountain whiskey.

As the evening progressed, Ed suddenly disappeared. I thought he might have left for a head call. When he did not return, feeling content, I was left with two of the valley's loveliest women sitting on the either side of me. At one point, the honey to my right turned to me and proffered a silver Meo ring. In my partially inebriated state, I was shocked, embarrassed, and a bit confused, as I had never before encountered gifting in Meo land. Because of the peoples' strange customs, I wondered if by accepting the ring we might be engaged. *What was next? Would I enjoy the honeymoon tonight with the marriage ceremony tomorrow?*

While I mulled over the possibilities of a liaison that evening, a light rain began to fall. As if pre-programmed, two men who had been standing in the background stepped forward toward my chair. Through gestures, they indicated that they would escort me up the hill toward the Blue House. They were probably my new "girlfriend's" relatives, and were quite firm in their insistence that I arrive at my sleeping accommodations alone. I had little other choice than to follow them, so, after bidding the young lovely adieu, I meekly started up the back trail with my new friends.

The rain increased, greatly impeding our progress. The two steps up and one-step backward movement was necessarily slow and difficult. After what seemed a lengthy period of negotiating

mini rivulets, mud, and slippery rock facing, the house appeared in the mist. Mentally cursing them, I thanked my companions profusely and climbed the stairs into the squad bay. I never saw my "intended" again, but was satisfied that the evening had been enormously colorful and entertaining. Furthermore, I was willing to wager a substantial sum of money that no other pilot had received such a souvenir.

Ed never appeared at the hilltop house that night. On Saturday morning, before launching, I asked him what happened. Knee-walking drunk from the many shots of the powerful lao-lao, he explained that, after heeding nature's call, thoroughly disoriented, he had found himself in the helicopter parking area alongside the strip. Greatly affected by the unfamiliar whiskey and dog-tired, he managed to crawl into his helicopter and spent the night in the aft electronics compartment. The episode was narrated in amusing Ed-speak that only Reid could muster, and the story became fresh grist for current bar tales.

On the twelfth, I was assigned to work north at Houa Mung for the day. Aside from satisfying the forward SAR requirement, I enjoyed working in the remote area. The people there always seemed happy and appreciative to have an H-34 and pilot present. They were helpful loading, fueling, and guiding me in unfamiliar areas when I deemed it necessary.

The "Coffee Man" was well trained to deliver a cup of java from the open sided thatched hooch on top of the hill. Grenades still hung loosely from his green 782-web belt. It looked like he had added one or two explosive devices, causing me to wonder if this could portend increased enemy activity in the area, or was just as a status symbol. If the former prevailed, then time would tell and I would certainly take note.

There was always a downside to working so far north. As Mike Marshall learned the hard way, should one be forced down by

weather, mechanical trouble, or ground fire, even if one contacted a high flying aircraft, rotorcraft help was generally an hour or more away. In addition, many of the lower river valley areas were not considered friendly.

TONG

Colonel Tong Vongrassamay's well-disciplined BV-26 troops were a mixed group of FAR, Meo, and Lao Theung. With Vang Pao's blessing they were attempting to expand their area of operations north of Sam Neua Town and in the northern Moung Heim valley around Moung Son (L-59), an area that included a historic invasion route out of North Vietnam toward the Plain of Jars. They continued pressure on Sam Neua, pushing against the perimeter of the town from the mountain headquarters at Hong Non (LS-86) and from Phu Pa Thi (LS-85) in the north. ⁶

Tong was an accomplished and aggressive commander. He was often in the field marshalling his troops, recruiting near the border, or actually penetrating the DVR on foot to enlist spies and spread the message that the RLG had not forgotten people in the region. For this reason, I did not often fly with him. When I did, he entered the cockpit looking wild and wooly, his appearance matching his reputation as a confirmed communist hater. Like the Biblical Samson, the tall man affected long black hair piled under his helmet and encouraged his well-honed troops to do the same. The legendary individual had earned his bones and killer reputation during a successful engagement north of Sam Neua Town. Courageously charging an enemy position, the story indicated that he popped a few heads with his flashing sword, inspiring his men to seize the site. He was anathema to

⁶ Ken Conboy, *Shadow War*, 126.

Pathet Lao forces in Houa Phan, and enemy military leaders sorely desired his head impaled on a pike.

In contrast to his harsh reputation, I found him actually a mild mannered man when conversing with him on the ground. His command of English was good, but he tended to be introspective, rarely uttering more than a few words, particularly in the cockpit. Like Tony, probably because of the noise and lack of a second headset, he preferred to point to positions he wanted to visit. Also like Tony, I implicitly trusted his judgment and instincts.

Like most indigenous Lao military men fighting in the country, Tong was highly superstitious, relying on both religious and non-religious talismans to ward off evil spirits and keep him alive. (Rumor held that Tong was a Thai-Lao.) Most of the more affluent individuals wore Buddhist images on heavy gold chains around their necks. ⁷ The common man used string or a form of braided material. The animist Meo employed their own brand of protection.

In addition to Buddhist images, worn under a large black and white neck scarf, a black cloth bag and sometimes a dried hog scrotum always hung from his neck. They were packed with fetid herbs, nostrums, and other special items provided by a back woods witch doctor and calculated to protect him. He professed belief in the ingredients' magical powers and was never without them. ⁸

The lengthy and boring trip to Long Tieng late in the evening easily lent itself to worrying about Hotel-24's recent

⁷ I was rarely without my gold chain and Buddhist images while flying upcountry.

⁸ Some of these prized objects had been replaced since losing some while participating in the Marshall rescue. As will be disclosed, Tong was dead by mid-year 1965.

engine roughness. Excess time to muse about the numerous malfunctions that could occur while piloting an H-34 generally occurred at the end of the day when I was tired and had a long flight to base. I did not particularly consider myself a worrywart, but merely demonstrating respect for what could happen to a machine with so many moving parts. Since flying in Laos, my concerns had rotated through several phases regarding navigating, weather, landing at high elevations, availability of fueling stations, and enemy ground fire. As I became increasingly confident and proficient with my ability to handle the machine--I liked the term armchair comfortable--and more at ease in the area, these factors tended to cycle, often becoming jumbled and interchangeable. Now the current engine problems were another factor to weigh heavily on my mind.

Daydreaming in the cockpit lessened some anxiety and helped pass the time. ⁹ I had already attempted singing in the past to keep alert, but could rarely stand my off-tune screeching. Occasionally scanning the instrument console to detect an impending problem, the process also kept me from staring down at the inhospitable shadowed ravines and forested mountains, where no visible forced landing areas existed. Once past Sop Kao, the four-rivers checkpoint between Phu Cum and Phou Vieng, from altitude, only rivers and streams along the route appeared to provide any viable landing area. However, with water levels still high and flowing swiftly, the chance of turning over after a splashdown was great.

In those early days, I was always delighted to pass over "friendly" Mounq Soui and turn on the final heading toward Sam Tong or The Alternate.

⁹ Although very tired at the end of the day, I will never admit that I dozed while flying an H-34 solo.

MOUNG SOUI

On the 13th, I worked RO at MOUNG SOUI. All seemed quiet in the area after renewed attempts to take the Phou Khouat summit had failed once again.

Late in November, after receiving questionable reports that enemy forces on Phou Khouat's hills had been reduced to two companies, Kong Le elected to attack. The plan included substantial artillery and air strikes, followed by envelopment from two sides. During the first phase, T-28 pilots would first strike southeast enemy ground positions. A ground attack from this direction was not believed particularly difficult. Once the base of the mountain was secure, the attacking force would charge up the east side and occupy the top.

Softening up Phou Kout's summit began on 1 December with iron bombs. Lao and Thai pilots reported extensive earthworks, but no visible enemy. The following day, T-28 pilots again stuck the mountain, while five Neutralist battalions secured a primary objective at the mountain's base. Pausing until the third, elements then moved up the slope behind T-28 strikes. After taking one knob, they again paused and failed to seize the opportunity to capture the entire objective.

The enemy counterattacked vigorously the following day with various crew served weapons, ejecting FAN units from a portion of the captured hill. ¹⁰ The government forces subsequently moved back down the slope. On the fifth, enemy tanks rolled into position and pounded the troops at the base of the hill; they incurred several deaths and many WIAs. Despite efforts, airborne FACs were unable to sight the constantly maneuvering armor in

¹⁰ Crew Served Weapons: These included machine guns, and mortars.

the dense woods until the sixth, when T-28 pilots managed to demolish four tanks.

After destroying the PT-76s, heavy AAA fire prevented T-28 pilots from conducting massive strikes on the wooded area. Consequently, on 10 December, an enemy battalion surged from the jump-off point and surprised the FAN, who rarely, if ever, adhered to correct military procedures or established an effective defensive system or patrolled their perimeter. Then, as in so many times in the past, to the disgust of ARMA and other interested parties, the Neutralists broke ranks and scurried back to Moung Soui, where they refitted and licked their wounds. ¹¹

The next day was a ho hum type working at Tha Thom. The weather still had not turned especially cold, but it was windy, as the December Chinese monsoon had surged down from the north. Therefore, I reverted to my old game attempting to autorotate from the series of hilltop outposts directly north of the loading area to the strip. Cheating a little, by climbing to a slightly higher altitude prior to splitting the needles, I nearly glided to my destination.

UNSCHEDULED MAINTENANCE

Joe Siaotong replaced Rudy on the 15th. We worked locally and spent some time on the ground investigating the origin of intermittent whiffs of an unidentifiable odor. Although definitely apparent, the smell was not smoke, fuel, oil, electric, hydraulic, or hydrochloric battery acid. I possessed excellent olfactory senses, and from previous experience, could distinguish most unusual smells. This one was completely

¹¹ Victor Anthony, 143-144.

different. It stumped and frustrated me, especially since Joe claimed that he was not able to smell anything abnormal. Unable to discover anything out of the ordinary, and reluctant to ground an aircraft without definitive proof of malfunction, I continued to work.

Soon we were loaded with supplies for Houa Moung, with an intermediate stop planned at Na Khang (LS-36). Located in a 4,400-foot valley on the border of the Houa Phan and Xieng Khouang Provinces, Na Khang was a relatively disused site situated adjacent to Route-6. Located sixteen miles south of Site-58 over harsh mountainous terrain, the site served to protect Houa Moung's rear flank. It also formed a launching pad for intelligence gathering patrols to the south and east. We rarely landed or shut down at the site except in an emergency or to refuel. As enemy pressure began to increase east of LS-58, current scuttlebutt indicated that the short, deteriorated Na Khang strip was going to be sufficiently improved to supply a fallback position should Houa Moung fall. ¹²

Despite the curious and yet unsolved problem with the helicopter, I elected to perform the mission. We never arrived at Houa Moung. En route, a slight odor still assailed my olfactory glands. More and more the smell reminded me of burning paint, similar to what I recalled when my Father blowtorched the side of the house in preparation to apply a coat of oil based Dutch Boy paint. The unexplainable whiffs were cause for concern, for from the inception of flight training, through both ground and flight instructors, we aspiring pilots gained respect for fire as the absolute worst way to die in an aircraft.

¹² Attesting to Na Khang's increasing importance in the area, Lou McCasland worked and shut down there on the 22nd. Lou McCasland, December Flight Time Record.

After landing at Na Khang, Joe again checked Hotel-24 thoroughly inside and out, discovering nothing that would cause such an aroma. Before we continued north, a local petitioned me to deliver a load of supplies to the east near LS-27. After flying a few minutes, the burning smell persisted and measurably increased. All indications pointed to a serious problem, so, after consulting with the guide, I landed in an open area west of Route-6. After trying to call Vientiane on the high frequency radio with no success, I called "in the blind" on VHF. Fortunately, a passing fixed wing at altitude heard my call and answered. I relayed the little I knew regarding the situation and, after receiving assurances that he would pass the information on, I shut down.

By then, I was quite upset with Siaotong. I knew something was drastically wrong with the aircraft and demanded answers. He retraced all that he examined before and still found nothing. This time he walked the slip free catwalk strip along the top of the tail cone to the pylon and examined the tail rotor mechanism. Nothing. Then, at my urging, he unlatched the hinges and folded the tail pylon, something not normally done until the end of the day to ease the required bearing greasing. This exposed the male bearing which supported the horizontal tail rotor drive shaft that in turn mated to the female junction located on the forward portion of the intermediate gearbox. On close examination, most of the input quill bearing was missing; intense heat from high RPMs had burned up the part, resulting in its almost complete disintegration. There must have been a logical reason we had been able to fly all those miles and almost four hours without a fire or an out-of-round drive shaft thrashing about, tearing up hangar bearings and possibly the fuselage. If we had continued to fly with such a condition, there is no doubt in my mind we would have experienced major

problems. The incident, a first, was incomprehensible to me and I could only speculate about the possibilities and thank the good Lord for our luck.

Armed with tangible facts to report to maintenance, Joe cranked up the auxiliary power unit (APU) in the cabin and I again contacted an overhead plane with pertinent information concerning our aircraft status. ACPH, Marius Burke, who like Wayne still flew upcountry, arrived later in Hotel-26 with a couple of maintenance people to repair the ship and deliver sufficient troops to provide aircraft security. Then he ferried Joe and me back to Long Tieng. Then, since it was my seventh day in the field, he drove me home.

The RON had been lucrative, but at considerable cost to my psyche. I had experienced two maintenance problems, any one of which could have created a serious incident. This gave me pause to question the overall condition of our machines. I also wondered how much longer they would hold together before someone suffered an injury or worse. Therefore, when called upon to test fly a machine, I vowed not to release any Company H-34 that I did not absolutely consider one hundred percent airworthy.

On 8 December, a clandestine radio station calling itself The Voice of the People of Thailand announced the Thailand Independence Movement. Founded on 1 November, the organization was commencing a revolution. The broadcast station was based in China, and the movement was communist-sponsored. Five days later the manifest was re-broadcast. The radical manifesto specified nothing less than the expulsion of U.S. personnel from Thailand and overthrow of Thanom's government. Furthermore, the message reported that the independence group would cooperate with any individuals or organizations who were patriotic (anti-government) citizens.

The broadcasts marked the organized beginning of covert guerrilla activities in Thailand. Although starting out as a mere pimple on the country's derriere, over the following six-months, incidents between RTG and insurgent forces escalated in the northeast portion of the country next to Laos.

THE MOHERS

Tom and Kathy Moher lived in a small compound adjacent to Soi Mahamit, a dead-end dirt road located a short block away from Sopa Villa. Walking distance was not great from Soi Wat Po, and hugging the dirt shoulder of Thahon Tanon, I could stroll there with a minimum of effort. The concrete and wood bungalow, one of two rentals, was quite small, consisting of a sitting room surrounded on two sides by sloped screening. An extended tin roof helped prevent slanting rain from entering the living area. A roll down split bamboo sunscreen provided shelter and a modicum of privacy when desired. A row of sizable banana trees growing outside further shielded the room from the elements and provided afternoon shade. There was one large bedroom that was

probably originally two. A small kitchen area led to a back door and a small porch that overlooked a pond. There was one combination bathroom-shower with a western style toilet adjacent to the kitchen.

For personal reasons, Tom had never been particularly happy working in Laos, and had long ago lost his appetite for flying in the hills. Then, after the botched June Klusmann SAR during which he was nearly shot down, like a deflated balloon, all the thrill of combat flying and adventure had completely waned. Consequently, he wanted out of Laos, and searched for less dangerous work within the Company system. Because of Company regulations regarding cross training, and a lack of fixed wing experience, he was locked tightly into flying helicopters for as long as he remained with Air America.

Then a possible non-combat opening materialized in Thailand. In December, Tom divulged to me that, if chosen, and if a Jansky and Bailey contract was signed, he and Kathy were moving to Bangkok in early 1965 to service a full time H-34 requirement. As the senior H-34 pilot, he was assured of the billet. It was perfect, for he could fly as low as he wanted. During rotating Bangkok duty, we had all worked at the J&B radio research site located in the jungle west of the city.

Contingent on if and when he left Udorn, Tom asked me if I would be interested in renting the bungalow and purchasing his rattan furniture, cupboards, shelves, and other fixed items that he had installed. The offer was tempting but, not especially wanting to move at that time, I told him I would seriously weigh the pros and cons and let him know. Representing the plus side, the place was adequate for the Mohers and would present a dandy bachelor pad. Moreover, it would be inexpensive, especially if the landlord agreed to continue charging the seven hundred baht (thirty five dollars) a month rent plus the pro-rated utility

sharing. On the downside, the Godnoma family lived to the right side of the two bungalows. The husband, a tall, thin Army major worked at the Thai Army base next to the Air America facility. The major seemed to be a quiet individual, apparently very subservient to his brash, mouthy wife, who spoke fair English. After the experience with the meddling Singwa rental that I shared with the Estes family and Jim Spillis in 1962, I was not overly fond of snoopily landlords living close to my residence. However, such arrangements impacted most Americans living in compound rentals, and the lack of a landlord was the primary reason I continued living at Sopa Villa. Another reason I liked the area was for Caesar's wellbeing. The area afforded an excellent place for him to play and roam, and was not as populated as Soi Mahamit. Furthermore, I had experienced enough trouble with Thais not understanding a large dog and acting foolishly around one.

Tippling me toward a possible relocation was the absence of American neighbors and increased exposure to thieves at Sopa. Even with a daytime maid, since Sang's departure, and despite the dog's presence, a problem could arise with me frequently absent and the house empty at night. Upcountry about half of each month, I was very concerned about thieves stealing what few possessions remained to me. Sang occasionally came by the house in the daytime to supervise the maid's work and attend to Caesar's needs. In addition, lonely for female company, when I was home, she often provided me short-time tension-relieving ministrations, but the intimacy was strictly commercial, as opposed to the fine mutual feeling when we lived together.

In contrast to Sopa's security deficiencies, the Godnoma compound offered American company (interlocking fire support from Burke and Nunez) and a nighttime guard to monitor illegal activities. There was some respite from my quemoy concerns when

Charlie Jones moved into Sopa on a temporary basis, for if our work periods did not coincide, someone would be home most of the time.

During my enforced time off in November, hoping to fill aimless hours, I spent a lot of time at Tom's house. I did not want to intrude on his married life, but both he and Kathy seemed to enjoy company and encouraged my visits. Being from the same area in the northeastern USA, we shared many common interests on varied subjects and I found Tom a very interesting conversationalist. For many months, including the time he lived nearer the Air America base, I borrowed books from him. His substantial library consisted of wonderful literature purchased at a fraction of the original cost during very early trips to Taipei. Before customs regulations curtailed the export of literary work, the Taiwan publishing industry "pirated" almost all existing reading material deemed profitable. Beside talking about books, we also philosophized about the war, the world, and anything in general. Since Kathy was an extraordinary cook and used to entertaining, they often generously invited me to eat with them.

Living in New York City during his formative years, with subway, taxi, and bus transportation infrastructure, Tom never learned to drive any type of ground vehicle. It was surprising that at this stage in his life, he could manipulate the controls of a complicated H-34, but not cars or motorcycles. Therefore, unless hiring a samlor for town or riding on an Air America bus, he preferred to remain at home. He loved to talk, and friends often stopped by to chat. Max Winn and his wife were two favorites. Steve Stevens and his Japanese wife Michico also were in the process of moving into a new house in the compound on the far side of Burke and Nunez. Michico, a lady with a lovely physique, frequently came by to converse in native Japanese or

play cards while I was visiting. At such times, I was able to speak the little Japanese learned during my Southeastern Asia tour. I also acquired new words, idioms, or colloquial twists in the language, not entirely devoid of sexual innuendo.

I thoroughly enjoyed Tom and Max's company, so learning that Max was leaving Udorn and returning to Bangkok after Christmas, during November, we went to the hospital to visit him. His job in the northeast was nearly complete. Technicians and public relations people had been adequately trained to cope with the liver fluke problem, and the lung fluke project he was currently working on was winding down. He appeared satisfied with his humanitarian efforts, and was anxious to leave for America, where he planned to retire.

Like all of us, Tom enjoyed alcohol's temporary effects. He also loved parties and was planning one at his house on Christmas Day. Because Western booze was still difficult to obtain at reasonable prices and in large quantities, Tom became interested in producing cheap homemade wine. While we were at the hospital talking to Max about his future plans, Tom mentioned the subject. Max, who claimed to be a master brewer and self-professed wine maker, presented Tom with two large circular beakers that had previously held formaldehyde-preserved specimens. He then instructed us on his winemaking technique and necessary ingredients to create a batch. Soon after we toted the containers to the house and thoroughly cleaned them, Tom purchased Welch's grape juice, raisins, and sugar from either the Army PX or town. Using only one container, these items were added to water in the prescribed amount, stirred, and the large opening covered with a fine gauze material and wire top designed for the container. To prevent meddling by outsiders, the top was securely taped. Day by day, we watched the brew ferment and bubble, and sniffed the solution for positive indications. Our

initial attempt to manufacture alcohol was slow in developing into anything approaching a wine status, and we speculated whether anything would be ready and drinkable by party time. After a few weeks, it actually began to smell a bit like wine. However, it was painfully obvious that we provided little competition, or ever would establish a mark in the worldwide wine industry.

CHET'S PLACE

Feeling more secure with their jobs, American families graduated from smaller bungalows to larger houses. Emulating Steve Stevens, they began building larger more modern abodes. Shortly after moving into one of Chet's bungalows, the McCaslands considered erecting a two-story house on open land directly opposite the road adjoining the Chet compound. However, they rejected the idea when estimates and money disputes arose with the contractor.

During late 1964, Wayne Knight and his growing family moved into a two-story house Mister Chet had specifically erected for him. Looking clockwise from the gate into the compound, the first two-story house was Weitz's Playboy residence. Consistent with the bunny logo on the façade, and living up to his rakish reputation, Charlie still hosted wild parties complete with loud music. Following one particularly noisy event, the next morning, Wayne rode to work in the Volkswagen bus with a new female teacher temporarily staying with the McCaslands. Then Charlie entered the van. Observing scaffolds on the side of his house to facilitate repair work or painters, she inquired as to their purpose. Specifically calculated to pull her chain, Charlie dryly replied, "*Platforms for my new speakers.*" Considering his old speakers sufficiently loud, the woman was overwhelmed by Weitz's comment.



Jackie Connor and Sanyo Pearson clowning in front of Charlie Weitz's Playboy Bunny house in Chet's Compound.

Author Collection.

Knight's large place, built to accommodate his family, was separated from Charlie's by a shared carport.

Ed Reid and his girlfriend Chai lived at the far end of the compound. A longtime friend of Chet, Ed Reid had the landowner erect a small bungalow over a stagnant, lily-pad filled pond. An elevated walkway led to the screened front porch. Blazing the way, Ed was one of the first Air America pilots to purchase an automobile: Chet's ancient blue coupe. With our increasing affluence, it seemed the twentieth century had finally come to Udorn, and vehicles soon began appearing throughout the community.

Living so close to each other, the Knights saw a lot of Ed and Chai. Lai became very friendly with Chai. They sat for hours playing an Asian card game called Gop Dam-Gop Dang.

Reid was one of Knight's favorite individuals. Despite conducting a relationship with a line pilot, he never had a problem with Ed's flying performance. Except for one short period in 1963, when Ed became temporarily unnerved over a particularly nasty pilot recovery, feared flying, and was sent to Taipei for rehabilitation, he was considered very dependable. There was no mistaking Ed's position on flying in Laos, and he never considered the odds while making a decision. He always got to know the movers and shakers in Laos, and was very close to Pop Buell and "Jiggs" Weldon.

Ed's personal life was as convoluted as his personality. Soon after sending his family home and divorcing his morbidly obese wife, Ginger, Ed took up with Chai. She was a Lao girl originally from Xieng Khouang Ville, who had reputedly been wounded in the thigh by shrapnel during early shelling. Although they lived together for years, his off again-on again relationship with her was quite dicey. He was on top of the world when they were harmonious, but when not the opposite was

true. For a period, their life together was good, but then she would journey to Vientiane to resume her previous profession. In Wayne's estimation, their lifestyle was much like the colorful characters displayed in the Marlon Brando movie, "Sayonara."

When not working, Ed generally drank beer all day and held court with visitors. When things were not working well at home, Ed went to Wayne's place and remained late into the night drinking Singha. Sometimes he needed to be carried home.

Bill and Wai Ying Pearson and her two young children from a previous Chinese husband lived in an adjacent bungalow. Billy, opting to take a break from upcountry flying and the escalating military situation, assumed the full time Club Manager reins from Dick Elder after mid-year, when flying increased and Dick elected to return to full time line flying.

Perhaps another reason Pearson replaced Elder was the continuous nervous threat of obligatory SAR work. Billy also had managed to puncture the underside of an H-34 on a stump while landing on the perimeter of an elevated refugee pad located twelve miles south of Long Tieng. Many pilots landed at the same landing zone without incident. In fact, in the many times I landed there, I never observed any stumps in or around the open area. Nevertheless, Billy claimed yellow sun glasses designed to reduce haze that he recently purchased in Hong Kong inhibited his depth perception. He did not fool many people with this excuse because most of us knew Billy's visual acuity with or without glasses was quite poor, even on a good day without the yellows. In concert with nomenclature from other humorous incidents (i.e., Haver's Lake), the site was thereafter known as "Pearson's Pad."

Some believed Bill's move to the Club Manager slot was a permanent career change. Billy had been in the food and beverage business before, and soon rendered the Club profitable. He

performed a good job as manager, but his methods were often risky to his personal health.

On one occasion, Pearson went on a buying trip to Hong Kong and discovered an unbeatable price on cases of Old Maul Scotch Whiskey. This liquor was identical to that sold in Europe under a more acceptable and recognizable brand name. Believing the Club could sell the booze for six cents a drink and make a profit, he purchased an enormous amount.

There were two other scotch whiskeys sold in the Club. A premium brand, Johnny Walker Black (fifty five cents), and a medium one, Cutty Sark. The Old Maul was placed on the shelf as a "call scotch" at twenty five cents a shot.

The Old Maul failed to sell well and Billy was beginning to fear he was going to be stuck with it. Then an idea occurred to him. He had the Thai bar staff save the empty premium bottles. When several were available, he filled them with the cheaper Old Maul and sold drinks for fifty five cents. The profit margin was enormous and the innovator privately claimed to a selected few that it saved the Club.

However, in performing this chicanery, Billy P lived very dangerously. Big Jack Connor was the Club's major consumer of premium brand scotch. Although generally mild mannered, had Jack ever suspected or learned of the ruse, he likely would have killed Billy. However, he never noticed a difference and Billy never informed him.

Rounding out the occupants of the Chet compound were Lou and Joan McCasland. ¹

On the 17th, after Wayne released Hotel-22 for flight, Art White and I terrorized the local night skies fulfilling local

¹ EW Knight Emails, 06/14/00, 07/12/00, 09/08/00.

management's periodic "dark thirty" training requirement. We were always more alert at night because of the "dark air" flowing through the engine's carburetor. By hustling, I was able to perform five landings and an ADF approach.

As a normal month now included at least two RONs, I expected to be called out any time. Since Christmas was sacrosanct for those with families, I believed that I would be working upcountry on that day and would miss Tom Moher's party. Attempting to balance the Long Tieng food fund books, I continued collecting from available pilots and wrote another check to Bird & Son for our contribution. We had already set a precedent by presenting General Kham Khorn with a case of scotch for his hospitality to our RONing helicopter crews at Paksane. Therefore, as a token of our appreciation for his care and consideration for us at Long Tieng, Dick Elder suggested we present Tony with a case of White Horse scotch for Christmas. He would certainly welcome the booze, for it would stoke his habit, while providing additional awards for his "poor devil." There was no fund accounting oversight, and I exercised total discretion over money distribution. I concurred with Dick's recommendation, as it would afford the helicopter group an excellent opportunity to display gratitude to our mountain bound buddy. On his time off, Dick still helped Billy P with Club purchases and maintained contact with suppliers, so he indicated that he would attend to all details of the purchase and its safe delivery to Long Tieng.

As expected, four days before Christmas, I was scheduled to RON at Paksane. Moon Centeno crewed with me to the Mekong River site in Hotel-15. Moon had flown as a H-34 Flight Mechanic in past years, but until recently, like Ben Naval and others, had chosen a temporary ground job in lieu of bouncing off mountaintops or perishing in a fire like "Pappy" Pascual. Already an old man, Centeno looked even older than he actually was. Still, he had experience, was very friendly, and performed to the extent of his ability.

The accelerated bombing campaign in both Military Region Three and Military Region Two created a much greater requirement for warplanes and men than ever before, hence the odds of losing aircraft dramatically increased. Therefore, because of its unique location between strike areas, work at Paksane assumed an entirely new importance as a primary SAR launch pad.

Hotel-15 displayed a problem with the synchronized throttle system that I had not discovered at Udorn before launching (the policy of test and go had not been implemented yet). I called the CPH on HF, and after convincing him that I had an actual problem, he replied that another aircraft he had just released from a test flight would be arriving shortly.

We worked the fuel load and then swapped aircraft with the pilot of Hotel-24. As this was the helicopter that had caused me so much trouble on my last RON, I wondered if I was getting a bargain.

TONY AT HIS BEST

Mid-afternoon, I was called to Long Tieng, where a disheveled looking Tony Poe waited in the loading area with a

curious, perhaps alcohol-fueled grin on his face. After entering the cockpit, he briefly indicated that we were going to look for a downed pilot, reputedly somewhere to the east. I thought it strange, for I had heard neither a Mayday nor a Dropkick distress call while airborne. Moreover, there were no aircraft visible in the valley, but I supposed they were already out looking for the man, or were being recalled from northern sites. I was somewhat confused at his presence, for I knew Tony's superiors specifically prohibited him, or other Customers, from actively participating in either SARs or Meo offensive actions. Still, this man cared little for rules and regulations created by non field-oriented rear echelon pogues. At that moment, as associated with most SARs, I assumed that details were lacking. Therefore, I decided not to question him any further, especially since he smelled strongly of Mekong whiskey.

Except for my Blackhawk peashooter, Tony's sidearm, and whatever Centeno was carrying, we did not have any substantial armament onboard. At my request, Moon passed up my flack vest, which I donned, and the flak shorts that I placed beneath the family jewels.

We launched, passed over Padong Ridge, by Padong, and still climbing soared abeam Site-65. He pointed northeast toward Phou Sao, at 8,500 feet the second highest mountain in the area, where the friendly Sites of 21 and 95 lay on its western and eastern slopes. Broken clouds inundated the middle reaches of the mountain. Not wanting to fly underneath and risk another Phu Kabo type incident on the north side, I climbed for altitude to avoid small arms fire, clouds, and adverse winds. We ascended slowly until finally reaching 13,000-feet and crossed the shrouded peak. Cruising at such a high altitude was a new experience, for I had never flown an H-34 to or above its service ceiling. At that flight level, diminished air density

caused the aircraft to mush uncomfortably through the sky. It felt nothing like I was used to, and large cyclic control inputs were necessary to maintain level flight--and it was unbelievably cold.

After clearing the north side of the mountain, Tony began looking down and indicated that he wanted me to descend. While still over the southeastern perimeter of the Xieng Khouang Ville Valley, he pointed to a small cluster of huts perched on a razorback ridge and grunted, "*Land there.*" Located east of Phou Kabo and north of Zeitler's failed SAR attempt, I wondered about the site's current status. While descending, I gave my cockpit mate my most quizzical look and inquired if he was positive it was acceptable to land safely. He assured me it was, but as he departed the cockpit carrying his hand-held VHF radio, he said to climb back to altitude, circle, and wait for his call. I was reluctant to leave him on the ground in a questionable area, but Tony was Tony, and it would have been fruitless to question his decision. Circling, I rapidly climbed for altitude.

I chose 10,000-feet to loiter and was happy to have the dirty vest for warmth, but still froze my "agates." After thirty numbing minutes that seemed like hours, he called me to land. On the return trip to The Alternate, he related that the folks on the ground had heard or seen nothing pertaining to a downed aircraft. Furthermore, I heard no radio calls from aircraft who must have been searching the area. Perhaps I was masked by the mountains, the report was fallacious, or the downing had occurred further south.

Unknown to me there actually was a RT-28 hit in the right wing by 57mm AAA fire in the western Xieng Khouang Ville Valley, not far from the area we searched. As the plane was not completely disabled, the Thai aviator, HT Baxrong, had added power, flown south, and bailed out a couple of miles south of

Ban Peung (LS-95) near Route-42. Friendly villagers at the site observed the smoking plane and the parachute. An H-34 pilot then landed at Site-95 loaded with troops. As the area was relatively free of enemy forces, they fanned out to search for the pilot. The man was retrieved close to dark and returned to his Udorn squadron. ¹

After dropping Tony at The Alternate, I returned to Paksane thinking there were few dull moments afforded a tired aviator these days. Where were the good old days of 1963 when, except for weather, maintenance problems, or learning new areas, a pilot had the luxury of boredom?

General Kham Khong was affable as ever. Before dinner he again offered me the bloody cherry clams he cherished and had delivered by air. He seemed more animated than I recalled. Perhaps it was because of the considerable successes his troops had achieved over the past few months, or the case of scotch we presented him in October. ² I really admired the guy, and he increasingly reminded me of a kindly grandfather. If passing him on the street, you would never imagine the low-key person controlled a large portion of the FAR army troops in Military Region Two and possessed great power. He reminded me of my benevolent HMM-261 Skipper, Colonel Fred Steele, who the troops would have followed into and far beyond hell if required. Moreover, few men in my short life possessed the same extraordinary charisma and leadership qualities of these two men.

As there was an abundance of work in the area, the next two days produced very high flying time. I realized the extent of

¹ Leonard Unger to State, Vientiane Air Operations Center After Action Report, 12/22/64.

² I never envisioned the political quagmire that was about to unfold in 1965.

how far the RLA was expanding when I was sent forty-two miles northeast of Paksane to deliver supplies and work at Ban Done (LS-28) in the Nam Mouan Valley. Normally, flights in the Paksane area, even around Tha Thom, involved shuttles over flat, forested terrain. However, this upland river valley site lay deep in mountains on the border of Xieng Khouang and Borikhane Provinces. It was all flight time, so even though the area was strange to me, I did not mind working there. Besides, it was extraordinarily beautiful. I did not observe many individuals wearing FAR uniforms and could only assume that the folks were former Pathet Lao or neutrals who had recently joined the RLG cause. It was the last time I serviced the area.

SEEDS OF A COUP

General Kham Khong was absent that night and the next day. When I asked where he was, I received a terse, "*Attending meetings in Savannakhet.*" Despite the diverse political ambitions and personal agendas of Lao generals, attempts were often made to create an illusion of unity. However, this façade was only temporary and the extreme enmity between the leaders would soon surface.

Always an underlying problem in the administrative capital, instability reigned in Vientiane. On Thursday the 24th, army troops and local police arrested a Lao senator and the editor of the Sieng Mahason newspaper. The action fostered accusations by nervous senior leaders of both sides plotting to disrupt the government. They denied any intention of starting trouble, but were prepared to act should either one move in on the capital.

Tension diminished, and then increased toward the end of the month because of enraged soldiers' troop movements near the capital. Expecting trouble, the National Police Force was placed on full alert. General Siho refused to attend two meetings held

during the previous four days to resolve differences, and no senior police officers were present when Lao King, Savang Vatthana, arrived at Wattay Airport. Police Director Siho was reputed to have requested T-28 support from General Ma's pilots in Savannakhet. It was also rumored that General Phoumi Nosavan asked Major General Kham Khong Buddavong to move his troops up Route-13 to Vientiane.

A cable to Washington speculated that the slightest incident could trigger a full-scale clash between the opposing forces.^{3 4}

With their boss absent, Kham Khong's younger officers took the opportunity to play. I was quite tired, but directly after dinner, two or three of us Jeeped to a local house of ill-repute and enjoyed a little Lao dessert. The fun did not last long, and I retired early to an empty squad bay in the rear of the house.

I worked all Christmas Eve day and expected another RON, but was assigned to fly Hotel-22 to Udorn. It was dark by the time I parked, set the brakes, rolled the throttle to idle, retarded the mixture control lever to cut off, switched off the magneto switch, and applied the rotor brake. Happy that the three-day RON had netted me thirty two hours, I treated myself to a couple of beers and a fine steak and fried potato dinner. It tasted decidedly better than the weeds and fish soup served at the absent general's house.

³ This scenario did not occur until early the following year.

⁴ CIA Intelligence Cable, Sitrep as of 2030 local hours, 12/29/64.
CIA Information Cable, 12/30/64.

To help reduce and more efficiently coordinate the increasing work load scheduling aircraft and personnel, dispatching ground transportation, and the myriad of additional jobs involved in running a smooth operation, Taipei hired the first permanent American Udorn Operations Manager. It was a time-consuming job that had previously been accomplished by the CPH office or the overworked Thai clerks. Until Tom Penniman's arrival, Dale Means had been filling in as TDY Operation Manager from Vientiane. After normal hours, many times he and Wayne took a carton of beer to AB-1 to drink with Pat Landry and others. Much to everyone's enjoyment, Dale became very talkative following a few beers. Therefore, during each session, the participants allowed a few minutes for Means to bring out his "soap box." When this routine was firmly established, when so inclined, Landry would call Wayne and say he was bringing out the "soap box." This phrase was recognized as an invitation to come to AB-1. ¹

For a long time, Wayne really did not want a permanent Operations Manager. A great deal of the work he performed was "Oscar Mike" related and he did not consider that anyone, not a pilot, or one who possessed intimate contact with upcountry operations, could conduct a satisfactory job.

TOM PENNIMAN

Tom Penniman, who held a top-secret clearance and had served as an officer navigator on large planes while in the

¹ EW Knight Emails, 07/15/07, 07/16/07.

USAF, was the Company's choice for Operations Manager. Tom arrived in Udorn on Christmas Eve. He obtained a room in the Ouan Ouan Hotel where Dale Means and Abadie lived. ² Dale had been handling the job, but wished to return to Vientiane where he felt more at home. Living at the hotel was initially convenient and afforded Tom the chance to ride to work in the morning with Ab and Means. Later, until his family arrived, he moved into Weitz's house when Charlie was on home leave.

Tom's learning curve regarding the operation and numerous terms was hampered by considerable confusion. When first hearing the acronym AB-1 mentioned, he thought it was Abie, as in the song Abie's Irish Rose. Later, when he mustered sufficient gumption to inquire, he was informed it was an acronym for Administration Building Number One. As a newbie, he was not yet informed of AB-1's hidden meaning. He originally believed there was mystery surrounding the code Madriver, a name assigned the 1841 contract (numbers changed over time). He knew there was a Mad River located in the state of Maine, and assumed someone from that state had labeled the contract. ³

When Pennimam arrived, Jack McMahon was still the acting Base Manager, while Ben was enjoying his three-month Texas vacation. Tom quickly learned about Jack's slow transition to civilian life and, unlike Ben Moore, his proclivity to cling to a firm military mentality. He also learned of Jack's unpopular policy restricting Company personnel from entering the Club in the evening while wearing work clothes. He rightly presupposed

² Abadie had a house built in Bangkok for his wife Lek.

³ I never discovered the derivation of the term Madriver, but the large drainage ditch separating the Air America compound from the taxiway was named the Mad River.

that more than one employee prayed for Ben Moore's early return to Udorn.

Tom's first encounter with the temporary Base Manager occurred a couple of days after Christmas. At President Grundy's request, McMahon and Abadie were in the process of obtaining photographs of the compound to be forwarded to Taipei. At 0900 hours, Ab summoned Tom to accompany him and Jack in an area walk about to help select the finest picture locations. While circling the pool, Jack paused and instructed Tom to select one of his B-bus drivers to shinny up the flagpole and attach a rod for the purpose of extending the flag so it would photograph properly, while he and Ab shot pictures from an H-34. After Jack left, considering the order the most ridiculous one he had ever heard, Tom inquired from Ab if his boss was serious regarding the emplacement of a flag stiffener. Ab assured Tom that unfortunately the man was dead serious. After extensive canvassing and cajoling, Tom could not recruit anyone to go up the pole and he refused to do it himself. Therefore, since there was little time before the H-34 arrived, Tom disregarded McMahon's order. However, Tom's job was saved when a gust of wind spread the flag to its full dimensions at an opportune moment.

Tom did not actually work directly for the CPH, but there was considerable overlap. When Ben Moore returned from leave in January, thinking him much too flippant, Ben did not like Penniman, although VPFO Tom Boyd loved Tom and his writing style. Penniman was very intelligent and a quick learner, which was probably misinterpreted. therefore, Abadie agreed with Moore and restricted his movement to some extent. ⁴

⁴ Tom Penniman Emails, 02/21/00; 02/25/00, 02/26/00, 02/27/00, 03/31/00, 04/01/00.
EW Knight Emails, 07/04/00, 07/06/00.

PARTY TIME

Anxious to learn if the wine had matured to a drinkable state, I went to the Moher house early on Christmas morning. After popping the top and scooping frothy residue off the surface, we sampled the "wine." Yuck, it tasted just like it looked: sugar water. Yes, it was decidedly weak, but it had to be consumed, and we hoped some effects might be felt if one drank enough.

Jack and Marilyn Connor arrived first. Jack held an unusual looking beaker with a long curved stem and spout. Bombastically claiming to be the father of a game, he filled the container. Then, tilting his head backward, he began expertly trickling just the right portion of wine onto his forehead intended to create a stream alongside his nose and into his open mouth. Since he initiated the game and appeared proficient in pouring and achieving the end result, I suspected that he had previous experience. The humorous activity looked easy, but for unschooled initiates, was very tricky and messy. As new people began arriving, those of us who now arrogantly possessed sufficient experience, had a great time watching and mocking less talented individuals dribble the wine onto everything but their mouths. The game, conversation, and good cheer continued well into the afternoon. I took my leave when, heated by the sun and overflowing with people, the small room, became unbearably warm.

After I departed, Max Winn came by the bungalow with two bottles of vodka, which he added to the wine to enhance its potency. Then a few Air Commandos filtered in and donated a jug of grain alcohol for the cause. After this high proof alcohol was added, the mixture became super powerful and the growing

party assumed greater proportions. In a relatively short time, those who partook of even a small portion of the supercharged wine became inebriated.

In the crush of people, Don Buxton accidentally tipped the Christmas tree over, whereupon enraged drunks seized and tied Don securely to a supporting house column. Then after he was wrapped with the tree lights, they were illuminated. In a reward-response mode, he was shocked until admitting that he was truly a Christmas tree.

Tom had a barbell in the corner of the room, the largest of which outweighed Billy Pearson. Thinking he would perform some macho lifting, Billy crawled under the long bar, but in his sodden state could not budge it and became pinned underneath. As he lay beneath the heavy iron, no one bothered to help him, except to provide an occasional glass of booze and a straw so he could continue partying.

I returned later, but everyone had departed for their respective houses, or taken the party downtown. Although parties continued for years, that was our last attempt to produce a home brew.

With my RONS completed for the month, I expected the CPH to schedule standbys at the field, local or day flights until New Year's Day, when I was certain to be sent upcountry. On the 26th, after checking the flight schedule and noting I was on it for an early test flight the following day, I returned to Sopa Villa. Venturing to the back porch to pet the dog before retiring, I noted that Caesar had failed to eat the rice and meat I had prepared earlier for him. As his appetite was normally excellent, I was puzzled. I placed his filled bowl in the refrigerator to save for the next day.

After the B-bus driver stopped in front of the house and honked the next morning, I placed the bowl close to the dog and left for the airfield.

That day, while CPH Knight tested two of three recent UH-34D arrivals, Hotel-27 and 28, I flew three different helicopters. ⁵ I began with Hotel-14, but after an abundance of work and almost two hours flight time that revealed many discrepancies, mechanics brought the tug out and hauled it back to the hangar. ⁶ During a recent rash of helicopter problems, inexperienced maintenance personnel were obviously attempting to release less-than-acceptable aircraft to unsuspecting pilots. After my recent wake-up call with Hotel-24, I was determined never to fudge on returning a H-34 to flight status unless it was airworthy.

After lunch, I was assigned Hotel-12 for test as a replacement for Hotel-20 at Paksane. Initially no better than Hotel-14, it required several starts and run-ups that included tracking and swapping mismatched blades to a point where they were acceptable. I finally exchanged the aircraft and returned home following a very full day on the ramp.

Caesar had still not eaten anything and appeared listless, but mobile. He drank water when encouraged, so I thought he might have acquired parasites or a cold. It was puzzling, for to my knowledge, he had never been sick and was always bursting with energy.

The next morning, I attempted to provide him a favorite meal of milk and a duck egg, but after looking at it, he still

⁵ A third addition to our fleet, Hotel-29 was still in the barn undergoing inspection and maintenance. Lou McCasland flew a test flight on this machine on 30 December.

⁶ When you factored in reading previous logbook entries, preflight, starts, stops, and maintenance on the line, actual time spent testing an aircraft was considerably greater.

would not eat. I realized that this was not a simple illness when he evidenced weakness in his hindquarters. I commandeered a B-Bus and went across town to Jarun Phangmon's veterinary clinic, where I had previously taken Caesar for early leg problems and a rabies vaccination. Jarun, a handsome, smooth-skinned man, was a Thai civil servant devoted to his work. After listening to my description of the dog's symptoms through my driver, he and his short assistant, Pro Ma, examined Caesar. They took his temperature, a blood sample, gave him three injections and said to bring him back the following day.

Next, I questioned the maid, who indicated that while I was away, during my three-day RON, Caesar had vomited a black substance and passed black stools. Since she had failed to inform me of this uncommon ailment, I was a little upset with her. Knowledge of this and his red blotchy skin could indicate poisoning. Caesar certainly had enemies in the neighborhood and quemoyes were known to poison animals at targeted houses. *Had the neighbor's husband made good on his promise to kill the dog so long after he bit his wife?*

Jarun's medicine did not seem to help, and the dog's condition deteriorated throughout the day. All I could do was to sit beside Caesar, while holding and encouraging him to get better. He knew I was trying to help, for he bravely, but weakly wagged his tail. For the first time in my life, I felt depressed and helpless, unable to care for an animal I so loved and cherished.

Up early after a restless night, I found Caesar unable to stand without enormous effort. His breath, nose, ears and footpads were cold. It was obvious that I was losing him. Before going to Jarun's clinic, I placed him in the sun and went in search of a samlor. Caesar was a very large, heavy shepherd whose dead weight seemed multiplied when I lifted him. When I

attempted to enter the cab and place him on my lap, he suddenly went rigid and looked like he had suffered an epileptic seizure. I thought that was the end, but after placing him on the ground he seemed to recover. During those few minutes, almost sick with worry and anxiety, the stark reality that he was going to die coursed through my mind. Terrible thoughts tore at my soul. What would life be like without him? In the lonely, sterile Udorn environment, he had provided me with so much happiness. During the year and a half of our association, he had been my friend and companion. He played and ran with me, and kept other dogs at bay and out of the yard. He had often driven me into gales of laughter with his antics and been a quasi-efficient watchdog.

After a great effort, I finally got him loaded and we began our long trip to Jarun's office. We were only part way when Sang drove by in a borrowed Honda Cub. Seeing the dog was sick, she was quite solicitous, for she also professed to love him. Then when I explained just how bad Caesar was, she broke down in tears. That was all I needed and we both bawled like babies, sharing a bond for an animal who had so deeply touched our lives. In a country of controlled emotions, the good folks in Udorn had probably never witnessed such a spectacle: an Asian girl and a Western male unashamedly crying on a main street. Certainly, the uncommon scene must have embarrassed the samlor driver.

Sang accompanied me to the doctor's office. Jarun was completely baffled. Chattering rapidly with assistant, Pro Ma, he probed Caesar and shook his head. Sang interjected the information I told her, but it did not help with the diagnosis. He gave the dog three more shots, and then, looking very serious, indicated that he could do no more for him. His demeanor was very discouraging, tantamount to a death warrant--the finality of a terminal disease. However, the examination's

impact and treatment was especially telling when he refused payment for the visit. I was amazed. Doctors just do not do that. Feeling compassion for the dog, and me, he must have sensed my great distress, and being the good person he was, made this all too human gesture. I never forgot it. ⁷

At the house, while lying motionless on his side, Caesar suffered periodic spasms in his lower region and groaned horribly. His tongue was black and breathing labored. Despite a rigid mouth and tightly clamped jaws, while holding his head in my lap, I attempted to dribble water and milk into his mouth from a hypodermic syringe. Despite severe discomfort and inability to raise his head, he still recognized me and looked at me forlornly out of one eye as if to question, "*What is happening to me?*" It was almost more than I could stand, and I briefly considered sparing him further misery with my Ruger. But I could not. I could never terminate a friend and companion.

As a last resort, I journeyed to the airfield to consult with a friendly Air Force doctor, who had helped the American community treat and immunize pets in the past. He listened patiently to my plea for help and admitted he could do no more than provide something to calm Caesar and ease his pain. Armed with a bottle of Phenobarbital and sage advice, I hurried to Sopa Villa still hoping the dog could overcome whatever ailment was killing him. Toward evening, after a couple liberal doses of the drug, he quieted somewhat, which lifted my hopes of his recovery. To warm his cold body, I wrapped him in two blankets and placed a hot water bottle inside that Sang contributed.

When I awoke on Wednesday morning, Caesar was gone. I was sad, but by then, resigned to his demise. Since his illness was

⁷ Jarun and his wife later became good friends of my future wife and me, and we shared many happy moments together.

never determined, concerned, I went to Air America to consult with Doctor Kao. I was informed that the region was currently experiencing a serious outbreak of rabies. Despite the dog's immunization two months earlier, and the fact that I had gotten his body fluids on me, the doctor recommended having his brain examined. It was the only positive method to determine if Caesar was indeed free of the virus. He recommended taking him to the SEATO laboratory at Kassam's hospital for the procedure.

Later in the morning, along with Caesar's decapitated specimen lodged in a cardboard box and a letter I prepared for the SEATO pathologist in Bangkok, I B-bussed to the Air America facility where Operations scheduled the box for air delivery on the first available aircraft. It was an ignominious send off for such a faithful animal, but sometimes circumstances in Southeast Asia warranted drastic measures. ⁸

I was very upset, and finding no solace in an empty house, went to the Club to seek sympathy and comfort from my peers. For all I gained, I should have remained home. Emotionally drained and depressed, I first encountered Jack Connor. When I told him the story, Jack, a normally happy-go-lucky person, displayed absolutely no compassion. He looked at me and scornfully laughed, "*It was only a dog.*" I was too dumbfounded at the man's insensitivity to feel angry, so I left in disgust. I wondered just to what level of humanity we had been reduced over the years. Were we so calloused that we could not recognize another person's pain and grief without making fun of him? I never had much use for Connor after that, and avoided him socially.

⁸ More than a week elapsed before Ben Moore, back from his extended home leave, received a message from the SEATO facility. It contained information concerning an examination of Caesar's brain tissue that indicated a negative prognosis for rabies virus.

On the final day of the year, I was mercifully on the schedule for an early test flight of Lao H-34, 1335, one of two ships we had previously transferred to the RLAF. Under terms of the "contract," we conducted all major inspections, heavy maintenance, and test flights at our Udorn base. Soon after releasing the Lao ship for service, a request for a day flight sent "C" Decosta and me to The Alternate for the day. I was happy to go, for of late, I really felt more at home upcountry. Moreover, the work helped ease my grieving process, and by channeling my energy toward serious matters, I could forget Caesar's passing.

Billy Pearson had planned an all hands New Year's Eve celebration at the Club. However, after flying almost nine hours, I elected to go home. Still depressed, I was not ready to celebrate a year that ended so badly. Also influencing my decision, I was on the schedule the following day, and McMahon's clothing rule was still in effect. Fortunately, Ben was due back in January and we hoped for improved employee-management relations.

During December, helicopter pilots achieved the year's largest H-34 monthly flight time with over 1,600 logged hours. Of course, additional aircraft and aggressive programs in newly opened Lao military regions helped with this figure. Although thos was impressive, the coming year would see an enormous increase in monthly flight time.

At Udorn, the Detachment-6 "training unit" maintained eight T-28s with sixty-six Air Commandos feverishly working around the clock at the Air America facility.

Soon to increase as the war escalated, there were 3,000 USAF personnel supporting seventy five aircraft at various Royal Thai air bases throughout the country.

During the "secret" Lao air war in 1964, USAF and U.S. Navy pilots flew 1,257 Yankee Team reconnaissance, escort, and weather-related sorties. Ground to air battle damage occurred to 115 planes on fifty-six missions and each service lost two jet planes. Although USAF SAR assets were available on a small scale, Air America personnel were exclusively instrumental in recovery of the quick and the dead. This would continue and expand until mid-1965.

SITUATION

On 30 December a CIA intelligence brief reported:

"...[In Military Region Three] substantial North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao reinforcements-possibly several battalions-have moved south along Route-23 toward the MOUNG PHINE area. Although their ultimate destination is unknown, they may be slated for

deployment along Route-9 to the Ban Nong Boua Lao area where rightist forces last week stepped up their military pressure."

A brief the following day expanded on the same intelligence in Military Region Three:

"A road watch team positioned on Route-23 about 35 miles northeast of Tchepone reported that southbound trucks were heard 'continuously moving' between 1900 and 2400 hours the evening of 23-26 December. This segment of Route-23, a key supply artery for communist forces operating in southern Laos and possibly South Vietnam, had been impassable to vehicles since the onset of the rainy monsoon late last spring.

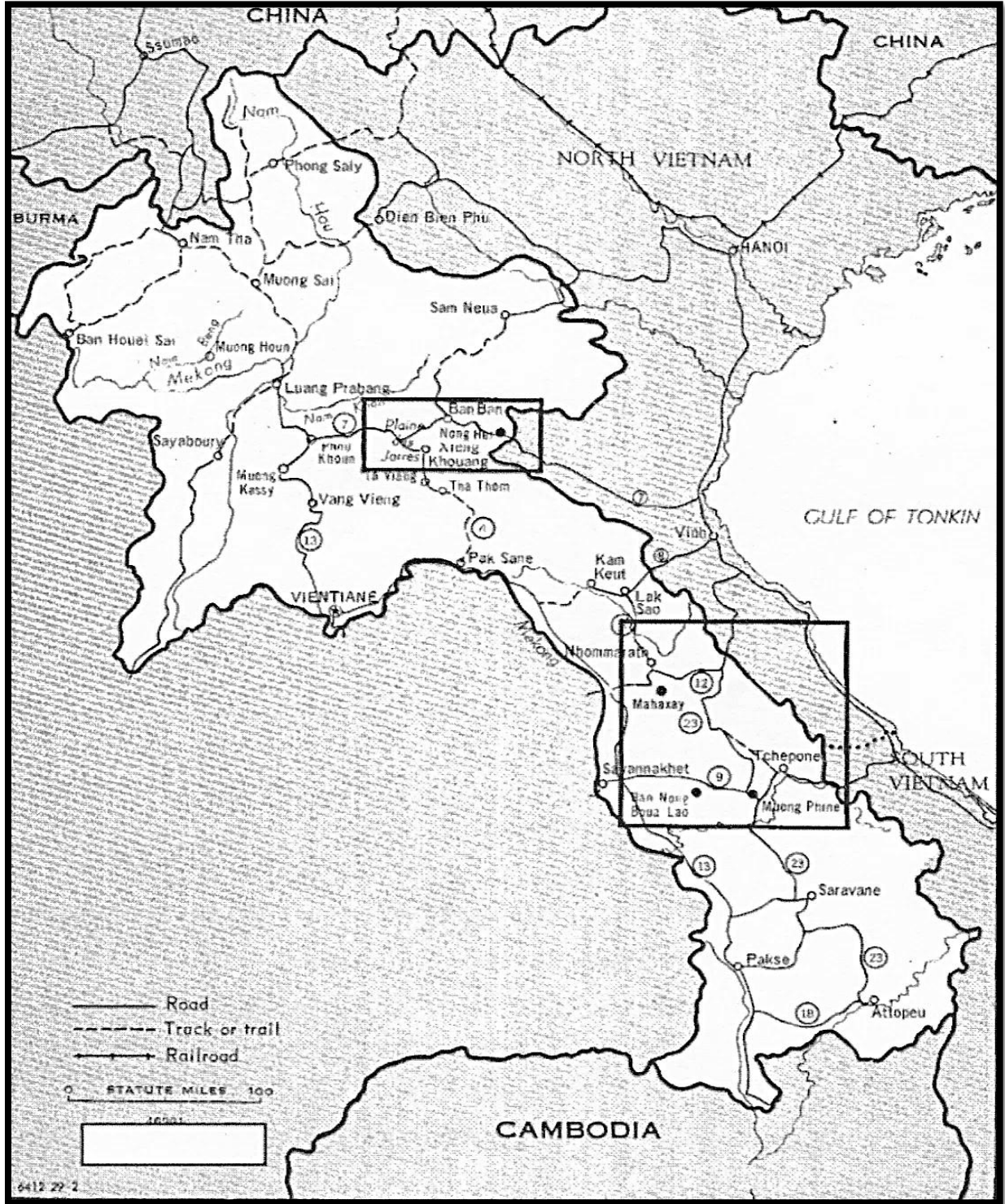
...at least 500 North Vietnamese troops had been reported moving along Route-12 toward Mahaxay.

[In Military Region Two] numerous communist vehicles continue to move into Laos along Route-7. On 23-24 December, 100 vehicles were observed travelling between Nong Het, a small town near the North Vietnamese border and Ban Ban, a supply depot east of the Plaine des Jarres." ¹

By year-end, CIA intelligence analysts reported an increased number of enemy troop movements in Laos since the conclusion of the rainy season in October:

"In recent weeks we have noted a number of communist troop movements in Laos, both into the Plain des Jarres area and farther south in the area adjacent to the Seventeenth Parallel. these deployments have put the enemy in a considerably better position to launch an offensive either out of the Plaine or toward the Mekong..."

¹ CIA Intelligence Bulletin 12/30/64, Laos: The communists are continuing to strengthen their forces in several areas. Some items redacted.
CIA, 12/31/64, Laos.



Inserts show the Military Region Two and Military Region Three areas mentioned in the Central Intelligence Bulletins of 30 and 31 December 1964.

CIA Map, 12/30/64.

Major efforts emphasized strengthening their Plain of Jars positions and, to a lesser extent, those adjacent to the Seventeenth Parallel. When time was considered advantageous, such deployments would allow enemy units to launch an offensive from the Plain of Jars or toward the Mekong River Valley.

Since late September, when Route-7 was reopened for movement of large enemy truck convoys, road watch teams and airborne photo reconnaissance revealed that fifteen to twenty vehicles were moving daily onto the Plain of Jars.

Thus far, although deemed capable, Pathet Lao forces had not resorted to major moves in the Plain of Jars area. However, stiffened by Vietnamese support, they rebuffed two government offensives supported by T-28 strikes. One movement was targeted against enemy positions north of Tha Thom; the other against well dug in and determined Pathet Lao at Phou Khout.

Most recently, the enemy increased forces in the eastern reaches of south and central Laos. By mid-December road watch teams in Military Region Three reported several hundred North Vietnamese troops had moved along Route-12 toward the Nhommarath-Mahaxay region northeast of Thakhet. At the same time, intelligence sources indicated several battalions were moving south on foot along Route-23 toward the Tchepone and Moung Phine areas. These troops, plus rolling stock, were observed moving during twilight to midnight. A logical conclusion was that the troops and AAA personnel were introduced to protect and increase security of the supply trails leading to South Vietnam.

By year-end, thousands of additional enemy troops were reported to have moved into positions in Central Laos. The movement apparently coincided with the reopening of Route-23, an artery that linked Mugia Pass to Route-9, seventy-five miles south. In addition, eighty trucks were reported carrying

undetermined cargo. After collating numerous reports, estimates indicated 4,000 to 5,000 North Vietnamese Army troops had moved into Laos. ²

Politically and militarily, it appeared that the undeclared war in Laos would result in a 1965 barnburner for all parties. ©

Edited 07/23/17, 01/13/2019, 10/29/19, 03/08/20, 03/18/20, 01/04/21, 05/17/21, 07/05/21, 04/13/22, 08/28/22.

²Segment Sources:

CIA Intelligence Memorandum SC #05780/64, Communist Forces in Laos, 12/31/64.

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Paraphrased Central Intelligence Agency Office of Current Intelligence, Intelligence Memorandum Summary, Communist Military Posture and Capabilities...12/31/64.

Professor Bill Leary 1964 Notes.

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